

"WHO AM I NOW?":
WIDOWS' LEARNING JOURNEYS
IN SELF-IDENTITY

By

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Abstract: Spousal death has been described as both a trauma and a “seismic event” (Montpetit et al.) and it is not unusual for one to experience PTSD symptoms. With almost one million people a year in the United States entering widowhood, research about the experiences of widows coping and growing from this tragedy are few, if any. This study, using narrative inquiry, included interviews with seven widows, as well as fieldnotes and writing prompts. It explores the meanings and values widows understood as a result of their new status. Findings suggest that women struggled with capitalist patriarchal societal norms that valued efficiency and rationalism over humanity and emotion, and thereby neglected to provide the needed attention to the grieving widow. As the sample was selected based on those widows who pursued further education after their husband’s death, a key finding was that education, formal and informal, made a major difference in their recovery and sense of autonomy. Predominately using the feminist theoretical lenses of Belenky et al. (1997) “women’s ways of knowing” and Nel Noddings (1994) “ethics of care and education,” both formal and informal learning processes explained the importance of relationships, society, and identity in widowhood. A widow’s world changes not only from the death of her spouse but also in private and public domains that can dramatically compound her grief and desire to live. This study makes recommendations for social institutions and what society in general can do to educate its members and even widows themselves to navigate this experience with more strength and optimism.

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CHAPTER I

"WHO AM I NOW?": WIDOWS' LEARNING JOURNEYS IN SELF-IDENTITY

The death of my husband took all of us by surprise, as it was quite unexpected and sudden. Coping with the grief and shock comprised one level of loss but his death involuntarily moved me from wife to widow in the blink of an eye. So, what does that mean? How can a widow not be the same person as she was yesterday as a wife? After all, everything else in the world remained the same. The sun came up that morning just as it always had but I suddenly felt a lot of doubt in my capabilities now and that was a new experience for me. This confusion and lack of self-confidence directly led me down a dark road of depression.

Background and Problem Statement

Montpetit et al. (2010) described spousal death as both a 'trauma' and a 'seismic event' that affects how the widow adjusts throughout the transition process. While the trauma increases in intensity during the bereavement period (considered by some authorities to represent two years after the death of the spouse), the length of time for bereavement and adjustment depends upon the individual's characteristics.

Individuals who experienced trauma, as in the event of spousal death, have similar symptoms to those who suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome) such as anxiety and social withdrawal. In order to compare bereavement and PTSD more thoroughly, it requires additional studies on widows. The urgency of such research appears warranted as statistics reflect almost 1 million men and women enter widowhood each year (Brady et al., 2010).

Widowhood is the most stressful experience in the natural events that can occur in one's lifetime (Montpetit et al., 2010). Bereavement represents a highly trying experience for survivors due to humans' susceptibility to depression, therefore, decreasing the size of their social network due to potential isolation (Cornwell, 2009). The widow's role, identity, or positionality within a cultural framework can diminish the number of external relationships available to her but various coping strategies may change this outcome (Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008). The impact of widowhood also affects the psychological and physical health of the individual. The existing literature appears to be limited in providing additional information on the possible affects from the widowhood experience (Bennett, 2010).

I realized my experience of self-doubt and depression was common for other widows also. Breese and O'Toole (1995) discovered women affected by external factors such as spousal death, job loss, injury or divorce experience increased levels of doubt about their abilities and potential compared to women not in these situations. The United States Census (2006) shows 42% of women represent the widowed population. Therefore, a need exists to discover strategies to help such a large population to adjust to widowhood. While these percentages predominately consist of older aged women (65 and

older), wars and fatalities will cause these statistics to rise and higher numbers of younger women may enter into widowhood.

Nevertheless, the number of women who outlive their husbands continually increases. The millennium (year 2000) arrived with predictions of women outnumbering men 2 to 1 over the age of 65 years in the near future. This ratio presents potential problems for widows' financial security in older years. The average age for women who become widows is fifty-eight years old. Considering the age when widowhood most commonly happens, women may not only experience gender discrimination but also age discrimination at this time of spousal loss (Brock & O'Sullivan, 1985) that may further result in conflicting beliefs a widow may have about herself and how the world defines her (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2009).

Research conducted by Bennett, Steinhoff, Pattinson, and Woods (2010) studied widows in both the United States and the United Kingdom and discovered widows may face more challenges than societies address. Emotional, social, health, life changes, dependency, support, and autonomy all represent important factors in the transitional abilities of widows. Additional challenges consist for those widows with less financial security, lower educational levels, or poor physical health (Utz et al., 2011). These authors agree that research focusing on the widowed population remains scarce and additional studies are needed that concentrates on this segment of the population especially in social work, health care, and policymaking.

Despite widows represented as a significant part of the population, the United States mainstream culture tends to define people in terms of couple-units rather than single entities (van den Hoonaard, 2001). Thus, while a widow experiences multiple

tangible losses when her spouse dies, she may also lose her social connections with family and friends along with her self-identity (Cheek, 2010). She must learn to redefine herself and make her own journey through life as a different person. In order for this to happen, she must first understand her present identity and decide the best path for her future as a widow. In addition, the social interaction that a married couple has over the duration of their relationship socializes the identities of each individual as part of a married couple (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996, p. 984). According to Lopata (1973), the loss of a marital identity instigates the widow's need to redefine her own self-identity.

Cultural norms are a critical part of identity formation. They develop from individuals in society who hold the most power and control over others. Due to their influence, norms can affect societal expectations. The "taken-for-granted nature of certain forms and practices" constitute what Bourdieu refers to as habitus and diaspora (O'Shea, 2011, p. 62). Diaspora refers to multiple meanings and limits the idea that there exists only one meaning suitable for all individuals due to the fact, people reside in various cultures that hold different aspects of meanings for those members (O'Shea, 2011).

Since diaspora offers multiple possibilities in meanings, a widow and her social group may differ in the definitions of widowhood. The loss of not only a life partner but also the change in how society now defines a widow requires attention. Group pressures and cultural norms highly influence how the widow may define herself. This process affects the widow's mental and physical health. According to Burke (1991), the relationship between a negative life event and any psychological distress will further compound the widow's ability to understand her self-identity. The widow's identity confusion has the potential to increase the bereavement and grief process that in turn,

may further develop her feelings of vulnerability, fear, and depression to the point of psychological anguish (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006).

Due to the potential challenges, a widow may encounter in both her private and public identities, a process of clarifying her new identity of wife/widow develops that combines a new identity and the reconstruction of an old identity. Bennett (2010) explains, “widowhood forces women to reconstruct their identities” (p. 204). Society tends to view widowhood as a onetime event occurring at the time the spouse dies. However, widowhood’s identity issue continues as an on-going process that can last for different lengths of time dependent on the survivor and her recovery process. Van den Hoonaard (1999) defines different recovery times as those continual processes generated by grief but continuing through and beyond the mourning period. Lopata (1996) further states the importance for the widow to establish “a new identity separate from that of wife” (p. 346) as quickly as possible for both her mental and emotional health. In order for women’s lives to adapt into a new identity, the widow either purposely makes new choices for her life transition or perhaps, unconsciously adapts to her present life through an identity reconstruction process (Bennett, 2010).

Personal identification directs the process of how individuals understand themselves and their roles within society. Dependent on relationships and cultural constructs, an individual defines herself partly in the way she identifies her membership to a particular cultural group such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, and widow to name only a few possible identities (Luttrell, 1997). Breese & O’Toole (1995) posit that a widow must “reach the point where conscious alternative seeking occurs, however, these women undergo some significant turning point that leads to reconsideration of their

identity” (p. 5). These researchers concluded it remains likely that women who experience a life transition such as spousal death, job loss, or divorce face a more difficult decision for their future roles. While a list of coping ideas can be found sporadically in literature that suggest the widow travel, volunteer, find a new job, return to school, or just learn how to garden, few sources, if any, provide information on the learning or self-discovery process as well as the tangible outcomes (i.e., new skills, jobs, or friends, etc.) widows may encounter. In addition, she may also experience societal norms that limit her options and possibly her independency needed to develop a new identity. For a widow who suffers from isolation, dejection, fear, and depression, how can society expect her to transition into new areas of life without providing direction and information for her to obtain it?

Within society, many institutions work independently from each other but also collaborate with each other to reproduce social norms. These institutions include the church, family, school, government, media, and corporations to name but a few. Each institution encourages the structure of privilege and oppression for marginalized groups. Women traditionally have suffered from what Launius and Hassel (2015) refer to as “gender-equitable policies that would promote female self-sufficiency” (p. 88). Gender policies could also be called the norms or ideologies that Launius and Hassel (2015) refer to as “sets of ideas or beliefs . . . always represent the attitudes, interests, and values of a particular group” (p. 80). Literary critic, Terry Eagleton (1983), has defined ideology as “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving, and believing which have some kinds of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (p. 15) such as capitalism and patriarchy. So, how can education help women, especially widows, develop new

identities due to widowhood? To begin with, the widow needs to understand and accept that norms and ideologies do exist in society but she does have options. Launius and Hassel (2015) understand ideologies as a means “to 1) identify patterns of thinking, 2) monitor one’s own thinking for those patterns of belief, and 3) critically reflect on how one’s ideas and attitudes are shaped by those beliefs” (p. 81). Education may prove itself as one way for widows to succeed in critically analyzing their options in life. For many widows, formal and informal learning may represent an available option to help discover not only who she is but also who she can become in the future.

Widows may utilize education or other transition strategies to provide answers to new role identities and perhaps, future ones. Transition strategies represent a part of the process for the widow to learn, navigate, negotiate, and redirect her energies; it is part of a process of the identity search to discover a new sense of belonging and introspection. When I began my identity journey, I believed that I had similar experiences as others did to seek emotional confidence and intellectual knowledge. However, the addition or subtraction of a new identity factor does not always materialize smoothly or quickly. To claim a new identity can require time and may appear initially as an impossibility. New opportunities to explore other roles may help to fulfill the wife identity role she no longer retains. Due to the identities of different widows, the transitional tools required for these women to recover may be varied. Studies have shown that a widow’s sense of independency remains dependent on the context of her culture and the attempts to persuade certain views upon her (O’Shea, 2011). Group memberships in society provide individuals with particular views that pertain to social status, self-esteem, values, and of course, common ideas that in turn, are influential to identity (Korostelina, 2014).

Individuals experience situations differently and depending on the person, the selections of transitional tools vary. Knowles and O'Connor (2015) explained this recovery difference as either "trauma focus" or "forward focus" (p. 17) in the bereavement process. The existing literature traditionally depicts the bereavement process to focus on thoughts and memories about the deceased (trauma focus) while optimism, goals, and planning focus on the future (forward focus). These researchers concluded the style of coping impacts the widow's physical, mental, and emotional health that ultimately affects her quality of life (Knowles & O'Connor, 2015). Since little research exists that focuses on information about the significance of available strategies widows can select, especially education, further investigations appear necessary in order to acquire additional information so widows can journey through widowhood easier and look forward to their future.

A widow faces a new independence, ready or not, and must learn how to assume this independence and be solely responsible for her well-being. Decisions that were customarily discussed as a couple are now left for her to figure out by herself. Such freedom can be challenging in such a context where it had previously never been experienced. Research studies of Bennett et al. (2010), find "more widows remain dependent than become independent following their husbands' death" (p. 225) making the need to offer widows information as to how certain tools, such as education, may benefit them in ways they have not previously considered. Britton and Baxter (1999) argue, "education is a key site for the construction of identity, but the meaning of education and its significance for self-identity varies" for the individual (p. 179). Therefore, mature students, such as widows, could benefit in the construction of a new

identity beneficial to their future through educational training. Key aspects of understanding women's perceptions about self-identity have traditionally been an area researched through the male lens and without the input of women experiences (Britton & Baxter, 1999).

Need for the Study

According to Brock and O'Sullivan (1985), the United States represents a developed country where long term support for widows remains either sparse or non-existent. Therefore, education may become a tool for widows to consider after the initial grief process subsides. Breese and O'Toole's (1995) study discovered women who experienced life transitions, such as widowhood, increased in the number of adults who entered into formal education. Although studies show that education acts as a resource by women who experience widowhood, few, if any, studies exist that examine the experience education can provide for the widow and in what ways this tool may help shape her perspectives on life and her position in society long term. Interestingly, in my research I discovered more literature on the coping mechanisms and lifestyles of widows in other countries such as Africa, Iran, Germany, United Kingdom, Finland, Israel, and Australia to name just a few, while available literature about the lives of widows in the United States, appeared much scarcer. Much of the information about widows in the United States focused on how to renew self-identity through religion, spirituality, family, friends, leisure activities, and changes in daily routines but little research appears available on the widow's learning process and transition into widowhood (Janke et al., 2008b).

Since widows vary in the selection and use of strategies to adjust to life transitions and identity issues and due to the anticipated increase of future widows (Bennett, 2010), the well-being of this particular sector of society requires further attention. Additional research to understand and prepare for their wellness is needed. With widowhood follows possible social isolation, mental and physical decline, inadequate life conditions, or dependency. The removal of these barriers could dramatically improve the widow's dignity and happiness in life. Knowing what role further learning plays in widow development may provide additional information on what aspects of education may be restorative and a source of empowerment in addition to providing her any needed skills.

Little research exists that describes how identity strategies may provide a widow with a new direction in self-identity (Bennett, 2010). After the experience of spousal death, a widow generally suffers from not only sadness but also stress. The scientific community blames a myriad of illnesses on stress but stress also represents a natural, biological function of the human species. An increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenalin levels along with other bodily functions affect how humans react biologically to a stressful situation (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). In fact, Lucas et al. (2003) credits widowhood as one reason for a definite health decline in the life of the survivor. Brady et al. (2010) "suggests that women may be more at risk of developing and maintaining a diagnosis of PTSD (post-traumatic stress syndrome) post loss compared to men, particularly when the loss is violent" (p. 36). Additional research is warranted and necessary for the well-being of widows according to these researchers. Stress proved invaluable in prehistoric times when our ancestors depended on the quick decision-making and physical mobility to avoid danger. Referred to as the fight-or-flight

syndrome, this decision resulted in survival of the fittest but the modern world for widows poses other concerns for widows' well-being (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

While the modern human continues to experience stress, it may not stem from wild animals but from the pressures of life instead. "With the American population living longer than ever, outliving a spouse and needing a functional new identity are becoming part of an increasing normative experience" according to Cheek (2010, p. 345). Changed identities, responsibilities, or lifestyles add to the stress level for many individuals. Johnson, Schwarz, and Bower (2000) credit divorce, marriage, or the death of a loved as the major causes of stress in today's world. Even events looked forward to with joy and enthusiasm such as a new job or the birth of a baby may result in feelings of stress if only to ensure all goes well (Cochrane & Robertson, 1973). Any one of these events disturbs and alters the routine life of an individual and therefore, induces stress. If the spousal death occurred unexpectedly, the level of stress involved and the manner to address the stress may instill additional concerns for the widow. Therefore, the circumstances surrounding the death can also add to possible stress levels for the life of the widow (Jamieson, 2012).

Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) describe how a life-altering event such as job loss, divorce, or spousal death inflicts stress before the widow decides to engage in new life roles. The option of different coping tools such as education, volunteering, new employment, or the development of new relationships all appear as alternatives to cope with loss and stress but in addition, these new roles and responsibilities may also induce additional stress for the widow. From knowledge of where to park on campus to how to

study for tests, the widow voluntarily positions herself within a new and altered student identity. Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies (2006) explained the selection of identity strategies develop “new goals that have ‘substitute value’ for those that must be relinquished” by the widow (p. 717). Leading to the acceptance for the widow’s loss, the correct identity strategy for a particular individual will help in the identity growth after a traumatic event such as spousal death (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

In this qualitative research design, I explored the journeys of women from wife to widow and their experiences as widows in further education. The purpose of this qualitative research study explored the journeys of women in the wife-to-widow process, examined what, if any, effects that education helped in the transition, and examined identity issues as informed by formal and informal learning experiences. I engaged in narrative inquiry to collect information on how widows defined both wife and widow roles, the transition strategies selected for their personal identity transformation and the reasons why, and how their identities have changed since widowhood. This study focused on understanding the way(s) further education may shape a woman’s identity after the loss of her husband.

Education in this study was not limited to only formal learning but also, informal learning. An individual can and does learn from other means such as one participant who entered the seminary or another who read self-help books. We learn from many sources such as social norms, traditions, and simply by watching and listening to other

individuals. Education can be defined as learning in the broadest sense of the word and does not need to be limited to a formal classroom.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of widows who have pursued further education after their spouse's death?
2. What, if any, difference did further education make in their lives?

Significance of the Study

Further research on transitional strategies would help promote additional resources available to widows (Bennett et al., 2010). The adjustment to widowhood consisted of changes for the survivor. Women who experienced a high level of dependency on their husbands for finances, tasks, and security also experienced more difficulty in their attainment for independence. If they succeeded in achieving independency traits, happiness and psychological health for them increased (Bennett et al., 2010). Those wives who learned how to perform tasks by their husband or those who performed these tasks independently of their husbands experienced an easier adjustment to independent life as a widow. Additional data, obtained from the McNemar Change Test, reveals that 58% of widows who demonstrated dependent tendencies in marriage continued to remain dependent on family and friends in widowhood while 67% of independent married women remained independent afterward. More widows retained their independency than reverted to dependency, while approximately 42% (depending on the situation such as car repair, home maintenance, and finances) continued

dependency on others for assistance. Therefore, a high percentage of women retained their dependent self-identities after bereavement instead of advancing into independency (Bennett et al., 2010).

Of great consideration in the importance of this study is the fact that the American population is living longer, therefore, increasing the probability of women outliving their spouses. The spousal death experience for widows appears to represent an expected situation due to the age longevity of women. The death of a spouse, previously defined as a life transition for the survivor, can bring stress, depression, and possible hardships to the widow (Cheek, 2010). This experience can introduce financial, social, and physical changes for the widow. However, her ability to create a new identity, role, or position in how she defines herself and where she finds her place in society enables the widow to cope easier with the transition process physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially (Cheek, 2010).

The outcomes of this study shares knowledge about the ways adult education may serve as a liberation tool and address the challenges widows experience in identity, social relations, work, and the practical aspects of life. Information discovered would shed light on how education may serve as a positive strategy to impart and/or reinforce a sense of empowerment for widows. With the existing literature so limited and superficial that pertains to widows' identity in the United States, those widows who have succeeded to redefine their identities can share suggestions and hope to other widows who may believe their opportunities are limited. This increases the importance for widows to recognize the need to develop new identities (Cheek, 2010).

Society and educational institutions need more awareness for the assistance widows may require. This study responds to that need by exploring the identity struggles of widows in the educational context. This research study revealed what aspects of education cultivated and reinforced a sense of well-being, resiliency, and autonomy in widows and how formal educational institutions can better support them in their academic goals. The result of this study provided additional information that spousal loss continued to remain a serious issue for widows in order to confront levels of independency and autonomy for their personal well-being in widowhood (Bennett et al., 2010).

Research Design

I selected narrative inquiry as the methodology for this research study. Crotty (1998) wrote, “when we narrate something, even in telling our own story, it is . . . the voice of our culture – its many voices, in fact – that is heard in what we say” (p. 64). Narrative inquiry describes one view but does not devalue the multiple views that potentially exist in the world. Crotty (1998) explained narratives as “no longer seen . . . as straight forwardly representational of reality” (p. 64). Individuals live in multiple realities with different viewpoints and ultimately, comprehend and internalize different meanings to life experiences. A constructionist epistemology permits the different experiences of widows to form understandings of widowhood. There is not a single definition to the meaning of widowhood but instead, multiple views due to the varied realities experienced as a widow (Crotty, 1998). With interpretivism as the study’s theoretical perspective, each experience added to the understanding of widowhood with the sharing and reflection of personal experiences and stories.

To understand the experiences of widows, I collected data from a demographic survey (face page), semi-structural interviews, writing prompts, and field notes from the interviews and focus group. Data collection from interviews allowed widows to share their stories concerning their experiences as widows in education. Sharing their narratives will document the wife-to-widow transition process and the role of education. Through the analysis of demographic face pages, creative writing prompts, and field notes from each participant, information was collected to study these diverse experiences.

I analyzed the data through an inductive process. Once the data collection process had been completed and transcribed, the use of open coding helped the researcher to understand each of the widow's stories in fuller detail and aid in any discovery of themes and collected meanings of widowhood. The narratives collected could share with other widows if education helps in to redefine their identities in the wife-to-widow transition process.

Theoretical Lens

For this research, I considered two distinct, yet relevant theories to understand the experiences of my participants. While neither theory is considered more important than the other is, both theories partnered together to provide further depth to my data collection. Feminist theory critically searched to discover those beliefs within society that may help to explain the experiences of individuals, in this case widows. Only with a critical awareness of those beliefs that exist within society can members begin to understand and perhaps challenge patriarchal norms that until now have been considered assumptive truths. For this study, I considered how patriarchy, capitalism, or gender may

factor into the perceptions of the widow's identity. Secondly, viewed through an interpretivist perspective, the experiences of individuals can be communicated and shared with others. This allowed the possibility to generate understanding and sensitivity into situations not experienced in the same manner, if at all, by others. Through this lens, society can learn from multiple experiences that gave voice to education, policymaking, community, support groups, and in ourselves.

Through a feminist lens, patriarchy and capitalism are inherent in the structure of society that women negotiate and navigate daily. Patriarchy and capitalism are systems of social power and control that enter into how we define ourselves. Sherry Ortner (2014), anthropologist, defines social patriarchy as "a system of cultural categories and personal identities" where men and women are "defined as both different and unequal" (p. 534). Viewed through a feminist lens, Allison Weir (2013), scholar and social justice activist, views the 'Other' as a possible liability for individuals' freedom and ability to change social identities. Even Freud claims mental dysfunction can occur from individual repression. Weir (2013) suggests instead considering "identities to be oppressive operations of power that ubiquitously constitute subjects by locating them within such categories as women" (p. 62). However, Weir (2013) suggests if identity freedom in society is viewed with the "resistance to dominant social constructions of the self . . . then we open up possibilities for new transformative identities to be created" (p. 37). Societal constructs and norms allowed individuals methods to compare and contrast themselves with someone else. Referred to as the 'Other' in literature, this comparison becomes a way to understand one's place within society in reference to another individual.

The self can be either in conflict with itself or with society in the journey of transition and accepting a new reality. According to scholar, Diane Hoffman (1998), “individuals who systematically approach experiences of ‘otherness’ (such as schooling) form a self-perspective that stresses the reparability of situational behavior from enduring value orientations may be more flexible in their social adaptive behavior” (p. 338). As a result, anthropologists viewed the self as a part of the larger structure of society. If identity only conformed to societal meanings alone, stereotyping individuals will ultimately continue (Hoffman, 1998). This includes any minority group, even widows.

Historically, gender differences have been discussed, studied, and written about in literature. Gender roles, experiences, and identity issues played important functions in these meanings. While some women resist confronting societal norms, other women may choose to define themselves independently from society. Patriarchy reflects the dominance of men and men’s ways of ordering and organizing the world over women’s; women become subordinate. In whatever ways gender inequity may develop, the result becomes a “different value placed on their work” occur (Eitzen, Zinn, and Smith, 2011, p. 243). In fact, research on capitalism shows that “the shift to a capitalist economy widened the gap between the power and value of men and women” (p. 243). After the Industrial Age began, labor became a gendered construct in society enabling men to retain more economic and capitalistic power than women. This is important to consider as widows, because, without male spouses, widows typically face a decline in income because of their husband’s death.

Ortner (2014) sees patriarchy as still present and active in the United States: “it continues to play an often invisible, but highly damaging, role in contemporary social

life” (p. 531). bell hooks (2000) further expounds upon this with “the struggle to end sexist oppression” (p. 26). Stereotypes concerning feminism remain influential in how women define themselves and their roles within society. This concern requires a critical analysis of understanding what constitutes feminism itself and how feminist stereotypes may influence identity development for women, in this case widows (Launius & Hassel, 2015).

Patriarchy, the designer of most gendered norms, produces social constructs that define people and their roles in society. Judith Butler (1993) wrote, “naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (p. 7). Therefore, the understanding of widowhood at once becomes conceived and developed into a concept imbued with stereotypes and deficit ideas. In addition to the U.S. norm of “leaving one alone to grieve” during times of death, the widow experience is compounded with the loss of couple status, and the loss of having a man, who in many cases gave more status to the wife’s value. Sociologist, Anne Byrne (2003), argued that there are a limited number of socially acceptable identities for women. Considered an appropriate outcome for the life of a woman, society places her within the categories of wife, marriage, and couples. A change to any part of this identity can influence how the widow continues to define herself as an individual (Byrne, 2003). Formal education may follow this same tendency to categorize widows due to its historical, Western, patriarchal foundation (Gaudelli, 2001).

The individual self is composed of both self- and social identities. While we may define ourselves as unique individuals, society can influence how others categorize us. Knowing how others may see us depends on any number of variables such as age,

religion, ethnicity, etc. Butler (1999) viewed women as enculturated into a set of societal norms that helped define actions, thoughts, and behaviors as acceptable or not acceptable. Butler (1999) credited “the web of norms that produces not only the domain of intelligible actions, bodies, and ways of life but also the domain of socially dead, marginalized, and abject beings . . . the heterosexual matrix” (p. 208).

Byrne (2003) explained self- and social-identity from a feminist standpoint. Ideologies to how women defined themselves stem from the categorization of identities such as family, womanhood, heterosexual, marriage, motherhood, reproduction, and dependency. Byrne (2003) further explained these ideologies as the “approved concept of womanhood . . . based on sexual difference and being in a dependent relationship to others” (p. 443). Approval from society incorporates into the composition of the women’s identity but results in a limited array of categories. Any disagreement in the meanings of these concepts or even a resistance from the individual herself can produce confusion and doubt in her identity and how others might define her. The ways a woman’s identity can incorporate other categorizations not so readily approved by society, such as widow, can result in direct opposition with the traditional expectations of society (Byrne, 2003). Self-identity emphasized how the individual interacted with others, self-knowledge, self-care, and self-reflexivity. Viewed by Byrne as ways for women to understand their identities, women continue to experience constant scrutiny based upon where they fit into society. Byrne (2003) credits feminism:

as critical in publicly challenging dominant social identities for women and as legitimating alternative values informing self-identity and social-identity.

Believing that they themselves are responsible for who they are, for the direction

of their lives, for values and relationship choices, they refuse to accept external criteria such as marital status as bases for identity. (p. 457)

Acknowledging one's independency, self-acceptance, and freedom to become who she chooses enabled widows to select an opportunity to develop a new self-identity and become the woman she desired (Byrne, 2003).

Many identities represent a woman. Race, culture, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, and sexual orientation combine to form her identity. Society must not generalize women due to their biological traits alone, but needs to consider other variables that shape her identity (Sgoutas & Alejano-Steele, 2007). Gender researcher, Chandra Mohanty (1991) states, classifying "women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or radical location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross culturally" (p. 55). Referred to as the intersectionist model of oppression or the matrix of domination, it represents "the action of interlocking systems of oppression, that focuses on institutions and structures of power" (Sgoutas & Alejano-Steele, 2007, p. 3). To attempt an understanding of widows' experiences, one must comprehend the other identities that incorporate into her self-identity. She should not be limited by the definition of widow only.

In addition, through an interpretivist perspective, stories shared by the participants in this research provided additional insight into the characteristics that defined the widow as an individual person. An identity represented those meanings incorporated from group membership that in turn; affected the roles the individual incorporated into her self-identity. She possesses many identities (wife, widow, student, employee, mother, sister,

etc.) and all of these roles combine to represent how she defines herself, making the individual a compilation of distinct agencies that exists within one person. It is important to consider “how these identities relate . . . how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts . . . how their identities tie them in to society . . .” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 3). While identity represents both the personal and group ideals, the structure of society grounds itself by the actions of its members linking the individual and society together, as “the individual exists within the context of the social structure” just as widows exist within their respective cultures (p. 3). People act in the manner that they understand best defines them.

Thus, meaning becomes the response to a stimulus. From a constructionist epistemology, the widow does not discover the only meaning available that pertains to her identity as a widow, but, instead, absorbs those definitions found within society that she views as her reality. These venues included her communication and relationships to other individuals along with symbols or representations of definitions found in society and came to mean different things to different individuals. Behavior constantly adjusts and adapts in relation to dominant societal views, as “reflexivity of the mind/self is central to the symbolic interactionist perspective and identity theory” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 19). This type of flexibility is a method to “challenge or adapt to the discourses in which they are implicated” (Talburt, 2000, p. 35). With an adaptive identity, a widow can position herself to develop goals that not only help with understanding who she is but also, how society may perceive her (Burk & Stets, 2009).

While sociopolitical structures may lack in distinct boundaries, they do define our experiences in an abstract manner. Social patterns occur and change throughout history

making our understanding of these expectations even more abstract. Some of these patterns become the assumptive truths found in society that in turn, may affect our actions and thoughts but we do not question them. Burke and Stets (2009) viewed sociologists with “the job . . . to discover, attend to, and understand these patterns” (p. 6). Thus, as Talburt (2000) explains, “narratives of lived experience offer new ways of looking at and thinking about the situations they present” (p. 36). Identities become of importance to us to provide the ties necessary to other members in society through communication and relationships.

A feminist lens was beneficial for this study and each framework provided insight into the lives of widows. Different realities made each story unique while the cultural realities of individuals greatly influenced how widows perceived their identities. For widows, choices and realities varied dependent on the individual and her specific situation. Some participants coped best with widowhood with formal and informal learning, while other widows confronted larger problems and continued in their search to discover themselves.

These widows shared personal stories of deep emotions, private situations, and heartfelt grief. In and of itself, each story added to the uniqueness of the individual and her experiences but also yielded knowledge to the lives of widows in society. While a number of theorists have been mentioned earlier to explain views of culture, patriarchy, feminism, etc., I selected to concentrate on Ned Noddings’ “theory of ethics of care” and relationships, along with Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. These frameworks gave widows a voice. It allowed them to share stories, explain themselves, and search for identity. Some participants shared stories informed by patriarchy while others did not.

Patriarchy has divided men and women by generalizing certain traits to describe gender simply based upon the individual's anatomy. Gender assumptions factor in the development of cultural norms and their influence on society to affect personal identities. The importance of caring relationships is assigned predominately to women and therefore, become a part of a woman's identity. As Noddings (2010) states, the human is born from and into a relationship with a mother's care to exist in the world. She explains that we originate and enter into relationships on a 'need' basis since humans desire the companionships of others. The primary focus of moral learning is to teach individuals to care for others through quality relationships. Communication, empathy, and behavior form the relationships people share with others (Noddings, 2005). If something should go wrong in these relationships, the individuals and the relationship suffer.

Patriarchy imposes meanings on social expectations that develop the norms in culture. Bodies of existing literature gathered from social institutions such as education, health care, family, social and criminal justice systems, and others inflict power based from a patriarchal lens to equate women with relationships and care (Noddings, 2005). Belenky et al. (1969) maintain a lack of learning of the individual will in turn, decrease the learning, and development for understanding one's world. These authors explain how "society teaches women to put their trust in men as defenders, suppliers of the economic necessities, interpreters of the public will, and liaisons with the larger community . . . men hold the power and in society's eyes have the ultimate authority" (p. 57-58). Men represent the teachers, religious leaders, the medical, the military, and the corporations. The attributes of a man's identity compare in opposition to women's identity.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter provides the reader with a summary of the fragility of widows' identities. Their loss typically comes when they are in a later stage in life, at a time when habits and norms with their spouse have been well established for years. Based upon the projected gender life spans, women will continue to represent the majority of the population who outlive their spouses. While formal and informal education is mentioned as a transitional strategy in literature, few, if any studies, have examined the outcomes on widows' identity development. In addition, while widows do not lose their identity in society, it does compel them to readjust their identity (Bennett, 2010).

Adult women who experienced the loss of a spouse find themselves immediately categorized as a widow. The actual transition of a wife to that of widow constituted a change in identity. The widow may have identified with her spouse as friend, companion, lover, co-parent, partner, and of course as wife. While these roles appeared similar, the meaning of each identity related personally to the individual and her unique situation. The widows who participated in this study have sought out further education after their spouse's death to discover a new self-identity and awareness. Potential transitional tools in education may serve as a reflexive method to acquire a positive response to life rather than merely an adaptive acceptance to the transition.

Chapter II will address the literature review.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the transition of wife-to-widow, a widow may experience confusion in her self-identity. The new situations she experiences in the wife-to-widow process can change how she perceives herself both as an individual and as a member of society. This chapter presents the existing literature that explains some of the identity confusions a widow may experience and the possible transition strategies to discover a new identity. The literature review will also highlight some of the difficulties in the wife-to-widow process in how society defines the widow and the role education may play in her understanding of herself and society.

In preparation for this research, I have discovered that the United States appeared to lack in an abundance of current day literature concerning the identity transition of wife-to-widow. More literature existed written decades ago in the U. S., widows from other countries, ways a widow might spend her free time, or referred to the widow as elderly with spousal death an assumptive expectation. One particular article by Haase and Johnston (2012), mental health counselors, explained the adjustment to widowhood for older widows as “an expected event” where “a disturbance in the assumptive world . . . is less likely” (p. 205). In addition, these authors also defined the younger aged widows as “a population that has not been carefully examined, even though ‘it is the younger widowed . . . who are at the greatest risk’ for psychological stress and trauma” (Haase &

Johnston, 2012, p. 205). These authors explained how war victims and natural disasters cause younger widows (*ages 25-39*) undue disturbances in identity. Haase and Johnston (2012), do not designate the dividing marker between younger and older widows, however, I would argue that adjustment is never easy regardless of age.

Haase and Johnston (2012) continue with “profound loss poses the task of relearning the self and relearning the world; we do this by fitting the troubling transitions in our lives into a meaningful story” is key (p. 206). Donnelly and Hinterlong (2013) remark that “as of 2009, the median age at widowhood from a first marriage was 61.1 for men and 59.4 for women” (p. 136). One important reason for additional studies of widows and their transition into widowhood comes from the Donnelly and Hinterlong’s (2013) findings that reflected, “in 2008, more than 14,300,000 individuals were widowed, with the majority being older than aged 65 years” (p. 158). The outcome, no matter the widow’s age, influenced the wife on her journey through widowhood and could result in a complex and difficult process (Haase & Johnston, 2012).

Social psychologists Amiot, Terry, Wirawan, and Grice (2010) determined when membership to new groups begin, or when group memberships ends, the individual entered into a situation where self- and social identities may require adjustment. This meant the changes of previous identity traits combined with new ones to determine her current self-identity. Korostelina’s (2014) research discovered “the individual’s need for a positive social identity, which can be achieved by a comparison between groups” (p. 217) ultimately leads to a positive in-group identity. A multi-faceted self-identity develops as it absorbs, extends, and elaborates new meaning and different group membership.

According to Naomi Ellemers (2003), group identity scholar, unwanted or unexpected group membership changes can result in threatening circumstances for the future. Widows realized the married group continued to exist within society but membership no longer included them. The social identity theory explains how groups provided a strong sense of identity and self-regard for their members. In this case, widows may still feel part of a group where marriage defined who they represented in society. Not all groups represented those an individual wishes membership though. For example, while individuals transition through multiple age groups during the course of their life, the result does not always represent a group she wishes to become a member of such as perhaps, the group referred to as 'senior citizens'. The same analogy may apply to the transition of wife-to-widow (Packer, Chasteen, & Kang, 2011).

The group of individuals, who experienced widowhood in the 2008 report, consisted of both men and women. Donnelly and Hinterlong's (2013) research included both genders in order to show the similarity of risks associated with either one such as suicide, depression, alcohol abuse, and poor health. A sociological aging study performed by Clarke et al. (2011) discovered both genders experienced significant amounts of depression when the individual had less than a college degree. This is an important point for this study because it already showed that education makes some influence in our individual experiences and her ability to process that experience. Clarke et al. (2011) also added "for both men and women, depression scores are significantly higher over the life course for those who are separated/divorced, widowed or never married compared to those who are married" (p. 1299).

Traditionally, research has speculated a relationship does exist between widowhood and suicide rates. Sullivan and Fenelon (2013) explained, “becoming widowed, controlling for age and gender, is associated with an increased mortality risk of 48%” (p. 59). To counteract such a high trend of widow suicides, Sullivan and Fenelon (2013) explained, “both education and wealth were protective against mortality in widowhood” (p. 60). Their research discovered not only improvements in the socioeconomics of widows, i.e., employment improvements leading to better finances, but also, to the development of social relationships formed through education. Marriage, according to Sullivan and Fenelon (2013) contributed to “the social support . . . associated with health outcomes” for widows (p. 60). Their conclusion helped to explain how the adjustment to widowhood dramatically effected the health and longevity of the widow’s recovery process from a social relationship perspective. Expounding on this explanation, developmental psychologist, Pinquart (2002) suggested the importance of life goals for hope and motivation for individuals. If these goals are believed obtainable, hope is generated for the widow but if the goal is beyond what she perceives as achievable, she may experience a decline in life purpose and suffer from further loneliness and loss.

Donnelly and Hinterlong’s (2013) study explained one solution for a widow’s health could be that “agencies that serve older adults should make more effort to make widowed individuals aware of opportunities” due to this “potentially vulnerable subset of population, maximizing their overall efficacy” (p. 168). Future numbers of widows and widowers in the U.S. are predicted to increase, as Americans tend to live longer. As a result, Donnelly and Hinterlong (2013) claimed, “mitigating the potential deleterious

consequences of spousal loss becomes increasingly important” (p. 168) to society and to the widow, herself.

Transitional strategies listed in literature to help widows discover new identities included education, volunteerism, hobbies, employment, new relationships, and even gardening. While any one of these methods could help fill the widow’s free time or provide additional finances, existing literature excluded the potential outcomes from these transitional strategies and if, or how, such a strategy could help in the transition process from wife-to-widow. Patriarchy, economics, social issues, educational levels, and even government programs instituted by those society members in power and control may also influence how the widow defines herself, her potential, and her future. Few studies explained identity composition due to patriarchy, power, and gender influences in society, and lastly, how the educational disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology factor into defining a widow. A few snippets of information are assessable to support a specific author’s viewpoint but a narrative of widows’ stories about identity changes largely remains absent from today’s literature.

Due to the scarcity of available information about identity changes for widows, additional attention is required before improvements for widows can be implemented within the United States. I selected this topic due to a personal experience and from the need of widows to share information with other widows. Shared information may provide widows the knowledge and awareness to discover what identity strategy(ies) may work best for their particular wife-to-widow journey.

Neimeyer et al. (2006), grief psychologists, agree “identity change in bereavement has been most explicitly studied in retrospective qualitative research,

documenting how the death of parents, siblings, or children can precipitate a significant reorganization of one's sense of self, for better or worse" but scarce research existed on how widows internalized identity changes (p. 719). Finally, Anne Jamieson (2012), educator and economist, questioned the different values that education can mean to various adults. She also reasons society maintains a consensus about educational attainment for adults that results in "intellectual stimulations, giving meaning to life, enhanced knowledge, self-confidence, and social engagement" but not if or how identities can change for widows (p. 2). A widow's identity transition appears to only be addressed superficially.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionist, Kate Bennett (2010), found "relatively little research is written about the ways in which it (*spousal loss*) impacts on a woman's identity" (p. 205). Symbolic interactionism, described by Stets and Burke (2000), represented how individuals define themselves within society's social categories. These categories are structured by the parameters designed by society and existed not by themselves, but by their relationship to other categories, i.e., black-to-white or wife-to-widow. Sociologists, Stets and Burke (2000), explained how "one's identities are composed of self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles" (p. 226). Sociologist and educator, Brenda Allen (2011) remarked, "identity is relational and human beings develop their social identities primarily through communicating . . . this perspective represents the social constructionist school of thought . . . identity arises out of interactions with other people"

(p. 12). She continued to explain how identity becomes a category that society has constructed to influence how its' members interact with each other and the way an individual defines herself (Allen, 2011).

Symbolic interactionist, Cheryl Cheek (2010), summarized how individual meaning is defined as:

a) Individuals' behavior toward things is based on the meanings they give to those things; b) these meanings come out of the social interactions that an individual has with others and society in general; and c) the meanings are influenced through the individuals' personal interpretations (p. 347).

An individual's reality stems from interactions with others. Verbal and nonverbal communication helped define these social meanings. Definitions that individuals accepted as the truth will depend on their daily life experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Additional studies are needed to identify the options widows have to effectively transition and find meaning that suits their aspirations. This would allow widows the opportunity to challenge those meanings of widowhood as defined by society. An increase in identity opportunities may help other women to journey through the wife-to-widow transition with the hope and encouragement to define themselves in the manner of their choosing (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social Identity

Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014), advise widows "that grief or mourning is not primarily an internal process, but rather one that is intricately social, as the bereaved commonly seek meaning in not only personal and familial, but also broader community

and even cultural spheres” (p. 485). The construction of meaning for individuals depended upon multiple sources in society. These could be one’s experiences in relationships, perceptions, societal norms, and policies that in turn, allows for the “narrative processes by which meanings are found, appropriated, or assembled” that can affect a widow’s identity either positively or negatively (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014, p. 485). This process begins at an early age through one’s relationship with family, friends, and school associations. Early identity development develops both consciously and unconsciously for the individual and becomes dependent upon the values and norms of the individual’s society (Allen, 2011). According to feminist scholar, Joan Landes (1995), she believes society repeatedly produces a worldview of identities so engrained as acceptable norms that individuals become immune in questioning their meanings. Due to this ongoing process of socialization, over time, individuals begin to consider these norms as the truth, therefore, accepting them as a natural reality in their daily lives (Allen, 2011).

Another feminist scholar, Patricia Gouthro (2009), defines a worldview as “something that is so encompassing, it is difficult to view the world otherwise . . . provide(s) justification for social practices that perpetuate inequality” (p. 161) and reflects a patriarchal conception of human classifications especially in the Western World transition. Cheek (2010) defines marriage as “when two people marry, they not only change their social position in society but they ‘redefine themselves’ creating a couple identity” (p. 347). Society members so acclimatize themselves to certain beliefs and values, the recognition of particular concepts that ultimately develop into norms can remain unchallenged or questioned (Byrne, 2003).

Norms develop into the silent method of communication between society and its' members. Allen (2011) defines communication as an influential way society can create reality. Allen (2011) views communication as, "the dynamic nature of processes that humans use to produce, interpret, and share meaning" and how these communication discourses have "helped to construct social identity throughout the history of the United States" . . . therefore, a social construct "produces, maintains, and/or resists systems of power and inequality" (p. 10). Communication receives/transfers meanings from school, church, work, family, and relationships to individuals' belief systems (Allen, 2011). Through communication and shared narratives, individuals can organize life experiences into smaller sections that allowed for better insight and understanding into the social order (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014).

Widows may view themselves as different now, an outsider at times, or less valued in society (Byrne, 2003). Non-valued descriptors of widows in society consist of "the fifth wheel," "three's a crowd" or "the odd one out" (Teo & Mehta, 2001). Cornwell (2009) argued, "older adults are devalued in and disenfranchised from modern society, resulting both lower social status and greater dependence of younger adults (p. 131). Veidemanis (1976) referred to widows as those isolated women in society. Perhaps, "one of the reasons they (*widows*) saw themselves as shattered, humpty-dumpty women is related to Ebaugh's account of role exit . . . people who . . . left roles" and experienced "some sort of hangover identity" that leaves the widow with the residue of a wife self-identity (van den Hoonaard, 1997, p. 539). Widowhood offers no social status, economic gain, or positive classification for the widow, i.e., cultural or social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Widows may find themselves classified or compared to other single

women who remain single by choice or divorced. These conditions were perhaps voluntary choices for single or divorced women but not a result of the involuntary displacement that the widow experienced from the death of her husband.

Society's use of labels adds yet another layer of meaning in how the widow perceives herself fitting into the world as a single entity. Since the label of singleness denotes neither single in the sense of never married nor that of a divorced woman, this confusion in itself can once again, generate or add to her identity confusion. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis's (2014) study further explained widows confusion as "mourning, in both its private and public moments draws heavily on narrative processes to establish the meaning of the deceased's life and death, as well as the post-mortem status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss" (p. 487). The Western world, especially, considers death a private topic shared with family members and close friends, but adapting to grief is crucial in the recovery process for the widow. Grief therapists, Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) explained, "people strive to reassert order and significance in a world made disorderly by loss" (p. 487). However, what better way to understand identity confusion and make changes in society than to communicate and share the experiences of the private world of widows?

Society uses symbols, languages, norms, and individual categories that evolve into the social structure designed to guide behavior and instill meanings for its members. Stets and Burke (2000) explained how "people are tied organically to their groups through social identities; they are tied mechanically through their role identities within groups" and to understand society or the individual completely requires the understanding of how individuals are linked to society in multiple ways (p. 228). Allen

(2011) asserts, “a person’s self actually consists of a personal identity and multiple social identities, each of which is linked to different social groups” (p. 12). Linkages of teacher, woman, mother, and wife represent only a few ways that an individual can be defined by labels. Each of the categories represents one link that helps to define that individual’s identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Such categories as these represent the individual as do perhaps other roles she internalizes such as sister or student. Since singleness, wifehood, and motherhood each carry their own identity significance, how does widowhood fit with societal norms?

If a widow perceives herself differently from the way society defines her, this chasm can affect her sense of self. It can lead to a conscious or unconscious change in her future relationships, communication style, or generate negative emotions in future situations. Cheek (2010) further explains the couple identity change as the “death of one of the partners, all of these behaviors, interactions, and boundaries are changed and the survivor is faced with the task of again redefining herself” (p. 347). The realization of one’s potential requires a knowledge of one’s identity. Our distinct characteristics make each of us unique human beings. These characteristics also focus on how the widow cares for herself both physically and mentally, copes with emotions, and looks to the future with either hope or despair (Byrne, 2003).

Brock and O’Sullivan (1985) claimed societies in the United States and the United Kingdom lack even a general support for widows. Bennett et al. (2010) agreed, “widowed women . . . do not receive as much support as widowers from formal and indeed informal sources” (p. 216). In addition, societies in many countries view individuals predominately as couples instead of single entities (van den Hoonaard, 2001).

This lack of support poses problems for single people in a variety of ways but particularly widows in the sense that both the public and private realms affect her self-identity. If society lacks in the support and quality of identity definitions for widows as single individuals, how does she negotiate her place within society?

Cheek (2010), sociologist in adult identity development, explains the single versus couple concept as “one of the foremost adjustments is that of creating a new personal identity as the woman ceases to be a wife and takes on the role of a widow” (p. 345). The widow often continues to think of herself as still married but not really or as a single person but again, not really, compared to someone never married or divorced. Language expert, Bennett (2010) explains the widows’ confusion in identity when she defines herself differently from how other individuals in society see her. These multiple views on how others define her can produce chaos and confusion in the widow’s identity.

To renew self-identity appeared to be more important in today’s world than previous times. Widows lose their marriage status when the husband dies. While motherhood may continue as a part of a widow’s identity, the older the children become the less likelihood that particular role maintains as high an identity level as when the children were younger. Fifty-two percent of widowers (men) in the United States remarry within 18 months of their wives’ deaths; widows are much less likely marry again (Teo & Mehta, 2001). Research on widowers indicated their self-identity remained uninterrupted within the male hegemonic framework that exists in society (Bennett, 2010), but a widow seemed required to investigate other possibilities to maintain a healthy self-identity. Male membership stayed intact while women advanced in a state of free fall and vulnerability.

Self Identity

Understanding loss depends on more than only societal meanings; it also includes a subjective process of how the widow incorporates self-thoughts into her identity.

Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) apprised loss through a psychological perspective with the study of individual self-narratives to understand adaptation to new identities. In other words, society monitors the bereavement process with the design of social constructs in how the widow should think, feel, and behave. Tony Walter (1999), grief educator, remarked, “all societies have rules for how the emotions of grief are to be displayed and handled” (p. 120). Not only the differences among cultures but also the period in history, polices the acceptable ways widows should represent themselves.

According to Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014), contemporary cultures today, such as the United States, view prolonged grieving or absent grief as “aberrant grief . . . pathological” (p. 493). Those individuals, who do not comply with what society considered appropriate, may risk disapproval or rejection.

Before some women succeeded in making the decision to pursue education, they experienced self-doubt followed by an internal transition that encouraged them to rediscover their identities. Breese and O’Toole (1995), role exit theorists and educational sociologists, refer to this transition as the result of a disrupted experience such as spousal loss. They discovered external changes for women, such as widowhood, do increase the tendency to question aptitude and abilities in general. They also discovered women suffering from self-doubt “reach the point where conscious alternative seeking occurs, however, these women undergo some significant turning point that leads to reconsideration of their identity” (p. 5). This study concentrated specifically on those

widows who select education as the primary identity strategy to reconstruct their self-identity.

The way each of us internalizes our values, morals, likes, dislikes, personality, or traits explains how we define ourselves. How society expects its members to think and act helps to define social-identity. Both self-identity and social-identity combine to form our individual identity throughout life simply because we continually learn from new experiences, relationships, and knowledge. Self-identity focuses not only on self-reference but also on society's role in how others might define us by way of gender, race, ethnicity, traditions, culture, age, sexual orientation, religion, class, stereotypes, and marital status. This concept leads society to group similar individuals together dependent on the similarity of traits and experiences they share. At times, individuals may voluntarily select a new role. Regardless, each role adds to the existing composition of the self-identity along with definitions society imposes. In a perfect world, both the self and social identities would agree, but what happens when this agreement does not happen for the widow? Bennett (2010) explained, "widowhood forces women to reconstruct their identities" (p. 204) while Byrne (2003) purposed society's perceptions encourage multiple challenges for one's self-identity and requires serious attention.

Sociology Lens

Many academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and education study identity discourse. Sociologist, Gaudelli (2001), believes “people are confounded . . . by understanding the individuals within socially constructed meanings of identity, or establishing a middle ground between ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What does it mean to be a ----?’” (p. 60). Various communication strategies used by society to accept death include family and friends stories, eulogies, literature, and elegies. All of these take part to construct meaning of the deceased’s life, identity, and the relationship to the deceased. Breese and O’Toole (1995) find it natural for individuals to “constantly wrestle with unique situations and life events that force them to think and rethink how they define themselves in their daily lives” (p. 12). In addition, various ways to express loss falls under the influence of the widow’s particular society. Prevailing views depended on culture, tradition, and the particular time in history, that influenced what is considered acceptable or unacceptable beliefs and actions of the widow (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014).

For example, a symbolic representation constructed by society denotes married women usually wear wedding rings. Rings are symbols that represent a part of how the widow defines her self-identity as wife explained by individuals in the social psychology fields (Haase & Johnston, 2012). Wedding rings, as Hasse and Johnston (2012) explain, represent one such meaning implemented within society by “rings especially became meaningful symbols, representing identity, moving on, letting go, holding on, and special moments” (p. 215). Grief specialist, Judith Saunders (1981), points out “there is no clear

guideline provided to widows . . . regarding wearing wedding rings after the death of a spouse, though society perceives one who is wearing a wedding ring as married” (p. 327). The removal of a wedding ring can thus provide attention to others that the woman is available but also according to Haase and Johnston (2012), could “create a feeling of insecurity or vulnerability, while keeping it on may feel fraudulent or protective” (p. 215). Cheek’s (2010) study revealed “although they called themselves widows, (*they*) rejected the ideas that they felt went with the term ‘widow’ . . . they felt the term implied a sense of victimhood and helplessness” (p. 361). Widows from this particular study defined themselves as survivors and not victims. Cheeks’ study failed to mention the identity strategies used by these widows in order to acquire this sense of self-power (Cheek, 2010).

Most individuals prefer order and structure in their lives instead of chaos. However, widowhood causes and generates chaos in the lives of survivors from the wearing of a wedding ring to the dilemma of knowing herself. Other sociological constructs used in society consist of pictures, clothing, and personal items of the deceased. Society has vague norms and expectations as to what is the acceptable behavior for widows when dealing with these items (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014). Nadeau (1997) views how norms can influence the understanding of social processes that can construct meaning, resilience, and the coping to loss for widows.

Identity is partially based from group definition where individuals shared in particular attributes that could include beliefs, traditions, language, physical traits, age, gender, sexual orientation, education, or occupation. However, Gaudelli (2001) contended, “identity discourse has tended to totalize the individual” but as Ogbu (1998),

educator and anthropologist, stated, “it is important to keep in mind that . . . not all members of a minority group believe the same thing or behave the same way” (p. 163). Gaudelli (2001) explains humans as those who “tend to think of best representations of categories, adding an evaluative dimension to their groupings . . . we readily categorize people to make them understandable” to us (p. 62). Cognitive linguist, George Lakoff (1987) explains some categories contain “degrees of membership . . . better representations” than others (p. 62). What then follows, according to Gaudelli (2001), is the tendency to “prejudge on the basis of those constructs” (p. 62). Allport (1954/1979) wrote, “a new experience must be redacted into old categories. We cannot handle each event freshly in its own right” (p. 20). In addition, people assign likes and dislikes to certain traits dependent to the value they place of certain groupings. Therefore, individuals sometimes unconsciously treat the group generally with one stereotyped identity.

Anne Byrne (2003), sociologist, believes before a new self-identity can form, a widow needed to perform a deep soul search to discover how well she really knew herself. Can she define her limits and is she aware of her possibilities? Lastly, can she consider herself as a single entity instead of part of a couple? To care about oneself remained vital in the maintenance of a healthy body and mind but also the emotional and spiritual sense requires attention. Relationships to others do not initially define one’s self-identity. Instead, a self-fulfillment to oneself becomes a first priority in self-identity (Byrne, 2003). “How can we recognize innovatory action or resistance,” Byrne (2003) asks, “how can it be made known?” (p. 444). She also highlights the fact there is little research available that measures identity construction for women and scant attention from

social scientists for instituting societal changes for women. Byrne (2003) believes “people can choose from a range of identities, recomposing biographical narratives of self and re-presenting themselves anew” (p. 445). In addition, she credits “values, choices, prioritizing, planning, and devising life plans contribute to the composition of self-identity” (p. 447) but wondered why some women resisted conforming to the norm. Some may prefer to discover themselves through independent means such as widows who looked to education for possible life direction while other women resigned themselves to comply with society’s expectations.

Psychology Lens

How one organizes and accepts a different self-identity will ultimately reflect in how she sets life goals. Clinical psychologists, Mancini and Bonanno (2009) believe “a large number of contextual and situational factors potentially contribute to the likelihood of a resilient outcome . . . characteristic of the loss and the person’s environment” (p. 1806). Other factors may include biases, attachment, identity, and positive emotions. However, the key to resilience remained one’s abilities to manage and understand difficult situations while continuing to function as an individual (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009). While resiliency can denote many definitions, Mancini and Bonanno (2009) define resiliency as those individuals who “are able to manage these difficult experiences in such a manner that they do not interfere with their ability to maintain functioning” (p. 1808). Widows who display healthy resilient characteristics may possess the capacity for “behavioral elasticity or flexible adaptation to impinging challenges” (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009, p. 1810). In addition, memories also represented another way to identify

and to understand oneself. While a widow's stories helped to make meaning of life, friends and family members may make different interpretations to reflect their view of the widow and her situation. Society has its own definition of contextual parameters to define group membership and behavioral norms (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014).

Research indicated women with a better method to minimize the loss and who possessed a stronger response to survive may be more flexible and apt to continue in life due to an increased level of resilience and survival compared to those who may lack in these strengths (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). Bennett et al. (2010) equated resiliency with independency and well-being. Bennett et al. (2010) suggested, "that this drive towards maintaining independence may be culturally dependent . . . subject to individual interpretation . . . one thing to one person and something else to someone else" (p. 216). In addition, if the death lacked a spiritual or existential context, these factors can delay the widow to accept the loss and continue forward in her life journey. If the widow comprehended the death as unnecessary and without validation, she may face continual challenges and pain in her search for new identity. A bridge to identity continuance lacks formation and the widow remains trapped on one side without a means to continue with the remainder of her life. Neimeyer (2004) referred to this transformation as a method of continuation from one life identity to another identity.

According to Thompson and Janigan (1988), a positive attitude of purpose and control becomes necessary for the widow to discover her self-identity. This attitude may help provide an explanation to why her loss occurred and gave the widow additional strength to redefine herself with hope for the future. Folkman (2001) refers to this concept as a method to appraise the situation in a positive light instead of a negative light.

Folkman (2001) further stated the importance of positivity as an important coping mechanism in the grief process. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) predicted “the ability to scaffold a story that renders the loss comprehensible, and in some sense partially compensated by the life learning it entails, are associated with more adaptive courses of grieving with the specific thematic structures anchoring such narrative varying as a function to the nature of the loss” (p. 488). An attitude of hope and determination provides the widow strength to concentrate on life instead of the intense focus on her loss. A negative attitude, such as always looking backward instead of forward in life, only generated difficulties in the healing process (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

Positivity also increased one’s sense of personal growth, accomplishment, and self-identity after such a traumatic life event (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Meaning and purpose derived from the event can dramatically become a catalyst of hope for the survivor (Thompson & Janigan, 1988). A search for a meaning to life surfaced after the widow subdued in her grief process. She may by no means become immune to her loss after a certain time period has elapsed but the severe symptoms of grief – crying, longing, anger toward the deceased, painful memories and fear – began to subside as compared to the degree of pain and remorse experienced immediately after the death.

Transformation may occur at different rates due to the mental and emotional stress of the widow in her journey through the grief process. She must build a new self-identity and continue forward on a new journey as a single entity. She may believe this process oscillates between hope and fear but instead, it represents a natural search for self-identity. Past identities and memories that have influenced her development process thus far will continually effect the identity search. All of these traits represented

meaningful ways to understand new experiences and situations (Thompson & Janigan, 1988).

Theorists such as Sochos and Bone (2012) discovered individuals who were able to cope with loss were often the most able to reconstruct their lives after a traumatic loss. These same theorists believed life goals often define identity change. Therefore, according to Janke et al. (2008a), “activities and factors that are *existential* such as those that provide optimism, meaning, and purpose for life, as well as spiritual and religious activities may be extremely important in determining the psychological well-being of widows” (p. 21). Ulmer, Range, and Smith (1991) discovered a lesser level of distress in those individuals who found a life purpose and actively work toward its accomplishment. No matter the goal desired, the result brings hope and encouragement for the survivor. Posttraumatic growth increases the qualities of future relationships, personalities, and happiness along with a reduction in stress and unhappiness for the widow (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Anthropology Lens

Cultures vary in how they interpret the ‘self and other’. Anthropologist, Diane Hoffman (1998) believes “we need to question . . . isomorphism between self and identity so that we can address both sociostructural and psychodynamic dimensions . . . hence the need for an anthropology of education” (p. 328). Anthropological studies, according to Hoffman (1998), reflected “the degree to which they (*cultures*) conceptualize agency and motivation as external or internally directed” (p. 328). Hoffman (1998) explains this as “a contrast between a self - defined in terms of autonomy, individuation, and separateness

and a self - defined in terms of social embeddedness, where quite different qualities such as fluidity, social dependency, and diffuse boundaries are more characteristic” (p. 328). In addition, constructions of the self may link to representations of learning, motivation, and education (Hoffman, 1998).

During the course of one’s life, the world offers options for understanding our identities. Individuals become accustomed to how they mold their self-identity to conform to these worldly categories. As one defines herself to a particular group, she feels non-threatened and in basic acceptance to how society perceives the actions and views of that particular group. She compares herself to other members of the group and develops a bond, consciously or unconsciously, to those norms accepted by the group itself. This membership enforces how individuals think and believe in themselves (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Cheek (2010) reveals, “identity is expressed socially in the choosing of those who are in the inner circle or those with whom one chooses to have the closest contact” (p. 348). Therefore, individuals selected to remain close to others who they feel share common values and experiences over time. Widows allowed themselves to believe that friends will always remain friends and loved ones will always be there for her in case she needs them. Cheek (2010) argues these assumptions “are powerful reinforces of felt identity” for the widow. However, if the friends failed to remain true or if family members disappeared, does the widow’s identity change? Referred by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) as how the person defined her self-worth, a different interpretation of the group appeared once membership for the individual ceased to exist.

Educational Lens

Education could provide methods for mental and physical wellness along with perhaps, confidence and the opportunities for new relationships but as female scholar and social gerontologist Anne Jamison (2012) questions, “what is often neglected . . . is the question of the different values and meanings educational activity can have to different adults” (p. 201). Due to the nature of what defines a life transition, Jamieson (2012), believes events can be considered positive or negative depending upon the accepted roles of the individual involved. However, she also adds a transition can “take days, weeks, months, or even years . . . and can be seen both as a process and as an outcome” (p. 202). Therefore, a life transitional framework may become another way to understand individuals who experience life transitions (Jamieson, 2012).

Education could assist widows to discover new identities if they understood how society has traditionally categorized wife versus widow and the assigned meanings of each. In the United States, education appears to focus on capitalistic characteristics such as individualism, patriarchy, and relying on skills to describe oneself (Hoffman, 1998). However, different cultures in the same educational system, according to Hoffman (1998), “presuppose a certain model of self associated with the white U. S. middle class . . . certainly not shared by many other cultures, including many minority groups in the United States who are supposedly ‘supported’ by multicultural education” (p. 337). Hoffman (1998) “sees this as the ‘identity threat’ that is implicated in the development of cultural inversion and oppositional identities” (p. 338). To determine what purpose education may provide to widows, we must ask if education continues the sorting process of individuals in successes and failures when only compared to the white U. S. middle

class population. If the school system does sort and compare solely to this particular population, does this comparison of individuals extend into education for the adult population, such as widows?

Britton and Baxter (1999), sociologists, studied if education provided different meanings dependent on the gender of the individual. In the course of their research, they did find much debate from educators disagreeing with each other in how each gender internalized education. Britton and Baxter (1999) suggested that “women returners to education adopt a ‘narcissistic’ view of education, seeing it as a means to self-development, in opposition to a presumed male view of education as credentialism, a means to a career” (p. 191). However, these authors highlighted how narratives are told differently by men and women due to the “differences in their life experiences but also from different understandings of self” (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 192). Compared with the traditional gender expectations deemed as societal norms, especially in an individualized country such as the United States, “education is a key site for the construction of identity, but the meaning of education and its significance for self-identity varies” and remained a complex issue that contained more variables than merely gender differences (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 179).

Research by Baxter and Britton (2001) discovered additional risks associated with adult women learners. Not only did life transitions and gender provide difficult obstacles but also did the women’s social class, family support, and financial insecurity. The results of Baxter and Britton’s study (2001) discovered, “for them (*women*), returning to education sets them on a trajectory of class mobility, which is experienced as a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked

hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority” (p. 99). Adding to the list of obstacles, any confusion or adaptation issues of how the woman defines herself as a widow could be compounded with these new difficulties. These researchers argued the women’s “different responses reflect the fact that they were at a pivotal stage in the process of transition between new and old identities. They could not yet achieve this physical and emotional separation, because they were still embedded in their old habitus” (p. 100). Baxter and Britton (2001) mentioned “students are not assembling a self in some playful pastiche but find themselves struggling to find their identities whilst buffeted by class and gender forces which at times threaten to overwhelm them” (p. 101). In summary, women who selected education in the transition process brought obstacles with them that can either help or hurt in their abilities to develop these new identities.

Academia, according to sociologists, Ha et al. (2006), finds adult education may factor into individuals moving away from traditional gender expectations. Any additional education may help widows resist the need to ask for legal or financial help from their grown children and adapt to making their own decisions, thereby, helping them become independent individuals. Ha et al. (2006) cautions this idea with “providing instrumental support often requires that one has important resources, such as good health” and other unknown variables that may factor into this theory (p. 25). They believe a successful identity transition may be easier for educated widows. However, their study also admitted to the lack of available research that examined this pattern more closely. They concluded their study with “if widows and widowers need different kinds of help as they adapt to widowhood, then developing services focusing on the domains ... most vulnerable may enhance the effectiveness of the social intervention” (p. 27). Traditional gender roles

especially in the Baby Boomer generation depicted a cautionary resistance to change one's identity due to the inherent stereotyping of gender behaviors of that particular period in history.

Education may represent one strategy to increase the widow's self-identity and add value to her future. Hallsten et al. (2012) contended self-esteem remained a vital component to motivation. While these researchers believed social settings, including education, may increase an individual's self-esteem, they found no research studies that examined academia's relationship to esteem or self-identity. Hallsten et al. (2012) credited "higher and professional educations usually take place during young adulthood" (p. 225). However, relevant to this study was Hallsten's et al. (2012) view of "higher and professional educations that offer students opportunities to develop their academic/professional competence, commitment, and identity" (p. 225) that enabled widows to enter academia and formulate new identities during and when they exit.

The successful identity strategy depended on the individuality of the widow. Data collected in Jamieson's (2012) research mentioned widows who described education as an identity strategy increased their options for the future. Dependent on those participants who Jamieson studied, education did not suit every widow's method of coping with loss. Different adults possessed a difference in values and meanings that made them unique in the ways to cope with stress and the loss of a loved one (Jamieson, 2012).

Michael and Snyder (2005) referred to new choices as "agency thinking" (p. 439). Sociologists such as Utz et al. (2011), determined "following widowhood, the surviving spouse must rebuild a life in which the tasks of daily living can no longer be shared with a spouse or partner . . . in confronting this reality, newly bereaved persons may feel less

than confident or feel completely incapable of meeting the demands of daily life” (p. 174). The consideration of education enacted as a possible identity strategy “may improve problem-solving skills, thus providing higher competency when assuming new tasks” (Utz et al., 2011, p. 175). If determined to implement plans and goals, the individual must develop positive, cognitive thinking abilities (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

Feminist Lens

Bennett (2010) defines widows as women who attempted to define themselves as wife/widow and tried to find their new identity within society. Society expected widows to automatically transform into new identities to succeed in this changed role. Viewed through a social constructionism lens, Bennett’s (2010) study reflected the identity challenges of widows. She discovered few studies that focused on how spousal death influences a widow’s identity. Since the life span of women usually exceeds men, most women will presumably find themselves in widowhood status at some point in life. Widowhood affects the mental, physical, and emotional health of women due to the manner that she defines herself and her new role of wife/widow in society. Van den Hoonaard (2001) added that couples represented society and this may explain the need for widows to reassert their self-identify in life.

Bennett (2010) believes widowers redefine their identity through a hegemonic framework while widows attempt to identify themselves through a wife/widow lens that does not exist within society. Johnston and Diekman (2015) concurred with Bennett with “central to gender stereotype content are beliefs that associate men with agency and women with communion . . . such as role behaviors” (p. 16). Again, a widow may

understand a wife no longer remained an identity for her but she may feel or not feel comfortable in identifying herself as exactly single either. The wife/widow combination seemed a perfect way to define herself but unfortunately, this term existed as her perception alone. The manner that the widow defined herself as either wife, widow, wife/widow, or single may directly compete with societal definitions. These differences, of course, only added to her stress and confusion.

Adult educator and feminist, O'Shea (2011), believes "identity is dynamic and complex as well as being sometimes contradictory in nature; identities contain a number of related and connected aspects . . . identity formation is a shifting process, always in production and never complete or finalized" (p. 61). Neimeyer (2004) explained how widows needed to design ways to move from one identity into another such as wife-to-widow status. This required learning from a life experience. O'Shea (2011) argued, "identity construction is a socially situated activity" (p. 63). The continuance of identity discovery defined oneself and led to an acceptance towards transformation. A restoration of meaning and sense making then developed and aided in the recovery process for the widow (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

An additional possibility may ascribe to the ways women were viewed in society dependent on gender differences. Johnston and Diekman (2015) believe that "women are perceived as communal . . . caregivers . . . nurturers" (p. 17). These gendered stereotypes may subconsciously influence the ways widows perceive they should behave in the grief and recovery process. No matter the reason for the death, survivors may experience additional challenges to overcome before they allowed themselves to accept a new identity and life transformation (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2009).

Socially defined groups influenced member behaviors and expectations. Social Identity Theory, according to Korostelina (2014), female scholar in conflict analysis, states, “together with personal identity, an individual has a social identity that is entailed in his or her membership in different groups” (p. 216). Common ideas, morals, value, and behaviors combine to adhere individuals together in a society. In addition, society strives to protect its existence for future generations with the societal development of norms, roles, and regulations. Mead’s (1934) research assumed the manner that individuals aligned themselves to certain group norms depended on the way society defined the group. Once the self-internalized the group’s norms and implied expectations, the individual incorporated those behaviors, information, and goals into the composition of her self-identity. Individuals could assume society agreed with the identity traits they have envisioned for themselves. If in agreement, this structured how an individual felt about herself and her membership in a social category (Gomez, Huici, Seyle, & Swann, 2009). Other theorists agreed the group became a source of identity and a sense of inclusion for the group’s members. As time progressed, individuals became even more identified with the group due to their length of time in membership (Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

Korostelina (2014) viewed group identity as “a large canvas tent that protects individuals as if they were family members. As long as the tent remains strong and stable . . . the members of the group do not pay much attention to it . . . if the tent is shaken up or disturbed, however . . . becomes a matter of major concern” (p. 217). According to clinical psychologist, Mary Main (1996), should this situation occur with much

frequency, the widow further distances herself and destroys potential group membership(s) due to the fear of pain and isolation.

Byrne (2003) presented a different outlook. She agreed the self and social identities represented categories of how women defined themselves but also in the manner, history defined the female gender. Womanhood, according to Byrne, represented traits traditionally defined as heterosexual, married, and mothers. In her opinion, patriarchy has strongly influenced the gender differences in identities and the result depicted women as dependent on men for societal approval. Due to this patriarchal lens, Byrne recognized the difficulty needed to separate the self from the social perception. However, the challenge Byrne (2003) proposed depends on the level of change and flexibility for the self in a post-modernistic world where each individual can select a new life identity and transform into the new role she selects. The widow discovers the freedom to make choices and set goals to structure her new self-identity. Byrne's research reflected self-identity as less affected by external factors such as life occupations and roles as that compared to the social-identity definition of womanhood. The self considers internal variables such as values, goals, and plans that influence the motivational level the widow needs to begin her search for a new self-identity (Byrne, 2003).

Life meaning requires transformation. O'Shea (2011) believed "individuals are restricted by the need to define and present a self that correlates with existing accepted identities" (p. 61). These traits offered strength and acceptance to loss but hope for the future. Self-transformation induces a process where the widow's primary goal focuses upon herself. To use identity strategies such as education, new friends, exercise, volunteering, religion, or a new job as catalysts for change, better allows the widow to

understand the challenges presented and what information she needs to help with the formation of a transformed self-identity. Britton and Baxter (1999) refer to this as personal reflection and agency. New identities appeared to match with the way the self recreated itself with new identifiers. However, O'Shea (2011) warns identities "may not fit existing selves and may even contradict the established self" (p. 62). When the self-agency transforms into a changed self-identity is when the individual becomes responsible for her behaviors (Britton & Baxter, 1999).

Persistence and attrition remain strong indicators of an individual's determination and success in new roles. One additional hurdle a widow may encounter in her identity process Launius and Hassel (2015) dub as "internalized oppression . . . seen as the marker of the success of the dominant group's use of ideology . . . women internalize sexism if they come to believe that they are less capable" (p. 87). The more roles the widow identifies herself with, the more difficult it becomes to take on an additional role of either student, employee, or volunteer. According to Jacobs and King (2002), additional roles and responsibilities may overload the widow with more responsibilities that she may not be mentally, physically, or emotionally capable to handle at a certain time. Each widow progresses through the grief and healing process differently. If a widow feels rushed to proceed through this natural process, she could face obstacles that may deter her to accomplish any goals.

Studies, conducted by Launius and Hassel (2015), discovered the sharing of "women's experiences and perspectives were for the most part absent in the curriculum" (p. 16) making it difficult for women to share information and learn from each other. While adult education remains such an important segment within academia, Jacobs and

King (2002) believe additional research is required to understand the needs and wants women perceive education to offer.

Previous adult research has studied the similarities of men and women's expectations in education and the ways adult students act and think differently as compared to younger students directly out of high school. Current research seems to focus on the quality outcomes of education on the adult student's life (Britton & Baxter, 1999). These authors reference Edwards (1993) to explain that historically education has been viewed from a male perspective and most adult research uses this gendered lens for analysis. Britton and Baxter's (1999) research reflects:

In recent literatures on mature students, a distinction is made between an instrumental orientation to education, which is said to be male, and a self-fulfillment orientation, which is said to be female . . . this dichotomous approach over simplifies patterns of gender difference in the meanings of education . . . assumed to be gender-neutral, is in fact based on male experience and ignores key aspects of women's understanding of selfhood (p. 180).

Edwards (1993) agreed that society considers data taken from the male view to represent the norm along with the assumption the same data represents women's perceptions and appears in agreement to the gender-neutral assumption of Britton and Baxter (1999).

While various identity strategies suggested important possibilities to transform identities for widows, the rationale depended on the significance a widow used tools to rebuild her self-identity (Britton & Baxter, 1999). According to sociologists, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (1991 and 1992 respectively), the construction of identity is

necessary in today's world for happiness. Launius and Hassel (2015) provided information that highlighted the identity discrimination that women may experience:

topics traditionally of greater interest to women received less attention than ... men ... films aimed at female audiences were shorter or of lower quality than those with primarily male audiences ... Wikipedia seems to be growing in a way that is biased toward topics of interest to males ... female editors were more likely than male editors to be indefinitely blocked (p. 97).

Many other tools may help widows with the opportunities to understand themselves in beliefs and values, limitations and possibilities, independent and critical thinking, and feelings of completeness and wholeness. The widow learns to take care of herself as a single independent woman and to take control of the future with a life plan while as Byrne (2003) explains, in the continual renewal of self-identity dependent on new experiences and knowledge that present themselves during the course of her life.

Women compensate for their self-limiters through personal strengths. Educator, Scarlett Studdard (2002) believes a woman's strengths consisted of a strong desire for knowledge and life experiences. However, such is not the case when studies view how widows made use of education to reconstruct their lives. Britton and Baxter (1999) state, "becoming a mature student can therefore be understood as part of the continuous process of identity construction which is seen to be central to modern life" (p. 180). Individuals perceived self-identity as unique and personal. Life experiences dictated how women defined themselves within society and while some experiences may be similar from one individual to the next, each woman used her own narrative to develop her particular sense of self-identity. Women think of others' needs before their own and in addition, an

unselfishness to push whatever personal desires they do have into the distant future. If widows, according to Edwards (1993), decided to seek personal goals, family, friends, and society may regard them negatively for the seemingly prioritization of their own needs before the needs of others. I would argue this view to be yet another patriarchal norm that seeks to limit women's freedom.

O'Shea's (2011) research reflected, "identity formation is a shifting process, always in production never complete or finalized" (p. 2). If a widow is accepting to a new identity in her life, it becomes an easy transition. However, if the new identity disagrees with the widow's likings, difficulties to adhere to the transition prove difficult or impossible. As Snyder (2002) would conclude, hope motivates those who suffer from life events and feel lost in the world. Hope directs motivation, determination, and the move forward to find happiness.

The Identity Search

The Identity Theory states individuals need a sense of self-awareness in order to change and protect their mental health from isolation and conflicts. Sociologist, Layder (2004), reflected how desires, regrets, and dreams can influence the consciousness in order to increase the widow's awareness to new possibilities. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis's (2014) study on widows implied "profound losses can challenge our self-narrative . . . and guides our performances on the stage of the social world" (p. 489). However, the social identity theory complicates the identity process with its' own meanings. Due to the fact each individual belongs to more than one identity group, the individual represents multiple identities that factor into the total self.

Olssen (2006) writes that individuals became liable for decisions made throughout life. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) believe, “ultimately, the responsibility for learning falls under the individual’s control and not solely from society . . . therefore, individuals eventually must assume responsibility for their own developmental process” (p. 489). The wife/widow transition may require that women build a bridge from their old life as a wife to that of a widow.

Education as an Identity Strategy

Research studies explained the many reasons why adults enter education, pursued better employment, or volunteered. These reasons may include such factors as financial concerns, employment, or numerous other personal reasons. Adults may desire an increase in salary as individuals could view education as one means to acquire the knowledge an employer desired while marriage and motherhood tend to hinder the time available for adult women to pursue education. Fears about education depended on many factors such as external support, study skills, and the length of time out of school. Any of these variables factor into the difficulty, for women especially, to enter education as adults.

Jacob and King’s (2002) study reveals more women than men allowed life events to shape their lives and dictate their future. Due to the increased effects of marriage and family responsibilities, women seemed to internalize more of these responsibilities than men do. Widows’ experiences of life events have definitely shaped their identities and directed their futures. However, widows may find education a strategy to help rediscover either new or past interests, desires and goals. It becomes important for the health of an

individual's self-identity to be aware of different ways that may provide the discovery of new possibilities. Perhaps, this would lead to more effective and productive lives (Rossi, Biscoti, & Bergeman, 2007). Neimeyer et al. (2006) studied widows who achieved "higher levels of benefit-finding and positive identity change were associated with lower levels of bereavement complication" (p. 715). Education may provide one link to valuable resources for a widow to gain knowledge about herself. In return, education may also provide a way to restore hope, balance, and meaning in the life of widows. Knowledge may prove influential in how a widow can define herself or how she wishes others to regard her (Courtney, 1992).

The consideration of education or training based upon an intrinsic motivation may also explain the mental desire a widow feels she must satisfy (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Pascall and Cox (1993) suggested widows needed to achieve the formation of a self-identity that reflects upon worldviews instead of domestic values of marriage and wifehood. Launius and Hassell (2015) warn, that work and family "manifest privilege and oppression in several key ways, including incentivizing marriage and, conversely, limiting social support for gender-equitable policies that would promote female self-sufficiency" (p. 88). Therefore, widows may view educational knowledge as a means to provide new opportunities and a way to formulate new identities.

Education scholar, Tom Schuller (2006) defines learning opportunities as one method widows may use to strengthen their well-being emotionally and mentally. Knowledge increases self-confidence and critical thinking for individuals. Schuller (2006) continues with "education can act to enable people to sustain their wellbeing, to maintain it . . . in the face of the strains and stresses of everyday life" (p. 16). New

exposures to information, thoughts, and ideas prepare widows for the adventures that lay ahead of them. One such thought for many mid-aged Americans, according to Launius and Hassel's (2015) is, "married couples are now a minority . . . this shift has been attributed to a number of factors including later ages for first marriage and cohabitation for longer periods before marriage" (p. 89). Interestingly, Launius and Hassel also discovered a growing number of widows are selecting to remain single but with no available research as to why this trend is happening (2015).

Chapter Summary

After the death of her husband, a woman discovers herself no longer identified by society as a wife and automatically placed within a new group referred to as widows. Her entire life has changed direction and momentum in a short time. How she continues with life depends a great deal on how she comes to terms with her husband's death through spirituality and meaning and if she can now envision her future as a single entity. The grief process depends on the individual's perception to these factors in order to heal. It becomes extremely important for the widow to redefine her place within society through various means. The purpose of this chapter not only mentioned the many reasons women may search for suitable identity strategies but also how these methods, especially education, may help discover and shape a new self-identity. The quality of how the widow views her self-identity in society now defines her individuality and self-worth.

The period to recognize or reconstruct a new identity does not happen overnight but instead, may require additional time dependent on individual characteristics. Bennett (2010) added the level of importance of the marriage the widow feels will in turn, affect

her success to overcome identity confusion. A widow's self-identity does not disappear automatically when her spouse dies, but remains a part of her identity until dealt with successfully. In fact, Lopata (1996) referred to this process as the "career of widowhood" meaning; some widows experienced more difficulty through this process than others (p. 15).

Traumatic events such as widowhood have the potential for one's identity to become unfamiliar and even threatening. The world transforms into a place quite unfamiliar to the widow. The world has changed and this may cause additional stress and fear for the widow. The question widows may ask of themselves concerns who they are now and if they can survive alone.

Chapter III addresses the methodology, research design, collection of data, study participants, and instrumentation of the study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study explored the journey of women in the wife-to-widow process, to examine the transitional strategies selected, and to examine identity issues as informed by the educational experience.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of widows who have pursued further education after their spouse's death?
2. What, if any, difference did further education make in their lives?

Overview of the Design for the Study

I selected a qualitative research approach because it allowed me, as the researcher, to understand the world as experienced by the study's participants. Sociologist, John Lofland (1971), believed in order to understand the world of another individual; a researcher needed "to capture participants' in their own terms' . . . learn their categories

for . . . raw reality” (p. 7). Qualitative research transports the reader into the participant’s world and allows the participant to explain reality in her own words (Patton, 2002).

This study is grounded within a constructionist paradigm that allows for the possibility of multiple understandings of experiences. No one definition exists that describes widows’ experiences; complexity and uniqueness are a part of each individual’s situation. Understanding reality is dependent upon cultural and personal interpretations. Crotty (1998) views constructionism as “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality . . . contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world . . . within an essentially social context” (p. 42). A constructionist lens views the world with meaning composed of the interactions between the participant and her reality but no truth awaits discovery since individuals bring their unique personalities and perceptions with them into all situations. The constructionist lens views information as creative, unique, useful, and at times, liberating but not the only explanation available. The widow’s identity, during the transition of wife-to-widow, consists of multiple interpretations to social constructs. The researcher must be vigilant and flexible to the possibility of newer and deeper meanings held by participants, therefore, making this study suitable for a qualitative research design (Crotty, 1998). Through the sharing of widows’ stories, I hoped to add further understanding to the wife-to-widow transition process.

The purpose of a qualitative interview process enables other individuals (researcher and readers) a look into another individual’s life experiences that may promote additional understanding of that life. In order to understand another person’s

experiences, a narrative approach in the data analysis provides insight and information into the individual's story.

Theoretical Perspective

I entered into this research with an interpretivist perspective to share multiple experiences of widows, provide them a voice to tell their stories, and to bring information concerning widowhood into society. I began as a neutral researcher unaware of how or if these stories would unfold in other directions. However, upon doing my fieldwork, I noticed that the widows' experiences were being shaped by a capitalist patriarchy stimulus and therefore, I adopted a feminist perspective for the data analysis as their stories emerged in the research process.

Worldly assumptions become the context for the theoretical perspective suited for each study and in this case, interpretivism and feminist theory align with the purpose of the investigation. Crotty (1998) defines interpretivism as the approach that "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p. 67) that promotes worldly assumptions to affect the understanding of our position within society, which is relevant to the social constructs that widows experience in their daily lives. Due to the gender of the study's participants as widows and their experiences in a world designed in patriarchy and capitalism, gender appears a natural lens to address and understand their experiences on a deeper level. The feminist approach may provide additional insight into the way society projects certain views and thoughts onto widows. Their narratives may further enlighten the reader to the possibility of negative ideals and

norms widows face every day. In order to address or instigate changes, one must be first aware of what exists in her world.

Interpretivism focuses on understanding meanings. Crotty (1998) explains this as one's "attempt to understand and explain human and social reality" (p. 67). However, no meaning discovered in interpretivist research can critically judge society but instead; it brings a heightened awareness to societal meanings that ultimately, may influence member's thoughts and behaviors. Interpretivism originated as one attempt to discover meaning in social reality, and as Schwandt (1994) explains, this theoretical perspective attempts to explain the world. Understanding experiences drives the interpretivist approach to explain the social world (Crotty, 1998).

Interpretivism reconstructs the subjective data for the interpretation of understanding individuals. This concept, of course, depends on the person, context, place, time of the individual's experiences (Green, 2010). Guba and Lincoln (1988) explain that "interpretivist knowledge is grounded knowledge . . . both discovered and justified from the field-based, inductive methodology of interpretivist inquiry (p. 68) leading the understanding to not only be from words but also the "shared context of natural experience within which it is embedded (p. Green, 2010, p. 69). Green (2010) also adds the impossible task to accept:

universal social laws and empirical generalizations. Transferability attempts to shift "the inquirer's responsibility from one of demonstrating generalizability to one of providing sufficient description of the particular context studied so that others may adequately judge the applicability or fit of the inquiry findings to their

own context. The locus of judgement about transferability thus also shifts from the inquirer to potential users (p. 69).

The level of interpretivism ultimately combines communication, experience, and knowledge to the phenomena.

The feminist approach centers on the lives of women affected by patriarchy, control, and gender oppression. This increased the disadvantages some women may face in their life experiences. Feminism, according to educational activist, Kim (2016), views “gender oppression or sexism . . . an ongoing global issue for women, while patriarchy is still alive and well throughout the world on many levels and in many ways, feminism and feminist theory are particularly pertinent to the time in which we’re living” (p. 48). She described the on-going discrepancies women face in today’s world where men continued to make their place in societal venues such as employment, economics, and politics. This in turn, increases men’s power and control over women and other disadvantaged groups. While women have constantly entered the work force in larger numbers recently, little power and control over decision-making may transpire between husband and wife. Due to this inequality, women may continue to experience less education, lower paid employment, and lower social status than men do that ultimately places women in a disadvantaged position. Young girls begin to experience gender conditioning by family members and schools to continue these traditional gender roles defined as men’s or women’s (Kim, 2016). Women who experienced gender oppression in any form also experienced, according to Kim (2016), “futures . . . limited unnecessarily to sexual bias and gender stereotyping . . . and sexual inequality (p. 49). Much work needs done in order to enlighten both men and women to such gender disadvantages.

While gender constitutes a large portion of feminism, the intersectionality women experience in “other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangement and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68) needs mentioning. Kim (2016) shares, “feminist researchers are acutely aware that it is almost impossible to use gender as a single analytical category, they must attend to multiple identities and subjective experiences of subordination, hence, intersectionality is an inevitable concept” (p. 51). Therefore, while gender is certainly a large factor in how widows defined their identity, other variables need consideration also.

Method

I used narrative inquiry as the methodology, as this study focused on widows’ life stories. Schwandt (2007) defines narrative inquiry as “the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies)” (p. 204). Narrative inquiry explains life experiences by asking questions designed for an in-depth understanding of life events. Stories represent the main component of narrative inquiry as individuals’ realities differ in circumstances and complexity.

Narrative inquiry partners with my belief that all life experiences in some way result in an individual’s life education and widows are no exception to this idea. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remarked how narrative inquiry resembled a multifaceted process where “different lives, the values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions, and structures, and how they are all linked to learning and teaching” constitute education

(xxii). Narrative inquiry explains the “sciences of people . . . lives and how they are composed and lived out are what is of interest” while even John Dewey is also reputed to state, “Life *is* education” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii).

Of special interest is Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) argument that “the idea of experience (so key to Dewey’s notions of education) has been lost in the study of educational research” (p. xxiii). Educational studies have historically concentrated on test scores, cost factors, and the most effective data measurement method. In other words, education prefers numerical evidence in data analysis. However, this idea limits the science of people to only numerical evidence without the consideration of their lived experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view human nature as, “we found ourselves quantifying what interested us . . . as we quantified experience, its richness and expression was stripped away . . . stories lived and told educate the self and others” (p. xxvi). While this numerical evidence supported agencies and policy makers to make a quick data analysis, the result dismissed the lives of the individuals involved and therefore results became skewed. Social sciences focus on individual, societal, and environmental variables such as beliefs, values, and morals. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) summarize, “as such, the social sciences are founded on the study of experience. Experience is therefore the starting point and the key term for all social science inquiry” (p. xxiii). Chase (2010) adds narrative inquiry as revolving around the phenomena and the individual who experienced the phenomena as she defined it through her unique lens and her unique reality.

A narrative can represent a story either written or spoken that contains an organized sequence of beginning, middle, and ending similar to the experiences shared by

the widows of this study. The story for this study begins with the death of a spouse, travels a road of self-reflection and identity change, and continues with the transitional process of wife-to-widow. While not considered a conventional form of research, narrative inquiry describes the story in terms that increases the reader's ability to put herself into the shoes of the character, in this case the widow. The goal of narrative inquiry is, "to persuade the readers or 'jolt' them out of their complacency" (Chase, 2005, p. 671). The narratives shared can provide a voice for other widows who may represent those disillusioned and confused, or who suddenly find themselves outside of societal norms.

A narrative story can be used within narrative inquiry but the two are defined differently. Educational scholar, Natasha Wiebe (2009), defines narrative inquiry as a method to delve deeper into a subject for additional information while a narrative bases itself from how the individual perceives and understands her experiences of the subject. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) compared the information found in multiple disciplines (anthropology, education, psychology, sociology) as similar "reflective pieces on inquiry and on how inquiry and its contribution to knowledge of phenomena . . . is changing . . . to bring in new ways of thinking about changing phenomena and changing inquiry" (p. 4). Other forms of communication can be used within narratives such as poetry, letters, books, etc., in order to illicit the reader into the situation and into the identity of the person in the story.

There exist different ways of researcher thinking in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly referred to these sections of consideration as temporality, people, action, certainty, and context. Typically, temporality becomes a way to understand an experience

as occurring at one particular moment in life. However, experiences continue to build upon previous experiences allowing them to change. This defies the belief that an individual's experiences do not have a past, present, and future implication (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The widowhood process begins with the experience of the death of one's spouse, transitions to what the widow experiences in the present, but also implies and leads her to future actions in her life depending on her acceptance and recovery from the grief process.

The second section of narrative inquiry seeks to understand the person involved in the experience. The intensity of beliefs, ideas, morals, independency, education, and variables either help develop the widow into a different person or she remains trapped in the past. Ultimately, the choice lies with her but it is important to realize that people are not made from the same mold and what experiences help shape one personality may be completely the opposite from another (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Individual actions develop due to the level of cognitive actions that parallel understanding and the acceptance of experiences to that of actions. The behaviors of widows are measured with more accuracy than mere spoken words. Actions provide a connection to the meaning held by the individual (Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain this concept as, "an interpretive pathway between action and meaning mapped out in terms of narrative histories" (p. 31). In other words, the increased level of cognitive development leads to the higher action performed by the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Certainty consists of the measurement of one's achievements. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe certainty as the "attitude in a narrative perspective is one of

doing ‘one’s best’ under the circumstance, knowing all the while that other possibilities, other interpretations, other ways of explaining things are possible” (p. 31). Additional information and the sharing of experiences constantly add to the knowledge pool of the phenomena investigated.

Lastly, context depends on the different individuals involved. People experience different objectives and life goals that distinguish them apart from each other. Context demonstrates itself in the multiple variances experienced by individuals. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain the context correlation as “established between performance and the variable, socioeconomic status. In the grand narrative, *the universal case* is of prime interest . . . in narrative thinking, *the person* in context is of prime interest” (p. 32) that allows individual stories of widows to reflect their individualities, similarities, and differences for study. This concept allowed for the greater chance of discovering information from those individuals who represented the population who experienced the phenomena instead of the generalization to the phenomena itself (Chase, 2010).

Patton (2002) describes interpretivism as a form of making sense of discoveries by “attaching meaning to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (p. 480). While descriptive information remains important, interpretivists delve into hidden layers of meaning to discover commonalities and differences in individuals’ lives that may factor into data analysis. During this analysis, the interpretivist researcher looks across the data for irregularities and draws inferences from interviews and field notes. Especially important, the researcher analyzes the data through a theoretical lens

appropriate to the cultural context with which she collects data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain this with “context makes all the difference” (p. 26). While possible causal links may emerge from the data, the study’s credibility and dependability hinge upon the interpretation made dependent on the study’s context, time, and location. The results though can never represent a single generalized absolute truth (Patton, 2002). Clinical psychologist, Ruth Josselson (2013), states “the interpretations of the material are products of the researcher, who will take care in the report to document the conceptualization . . . the analysis is of the interview materials, not of the participant” (p.179). Therefore, the researcher is the research instrument.

In addition, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue was also considered for this study. Bakhtin (1981) considered polyphony to “represent “a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (p. 6) or as Kim (2016) collaborates, “simply multiple voices, where no voice enjoys an absolute privilege . . . different voices, including the author’s, are heard without having one voice privileged over the others” (p.74). Both Bakhtin and Kim agreed that “polyphony . . . is not the absence of the researcher’s voice, but the position of the researcher in a text” (p. 75). Also noteworthy to include, Bakhtin (1981) mentioned how dialogic truth “is born *between people* collectively searching for truth” (p. 75) but not solely one generalized truth.

Chronotope, according to Bakhtin (1981), denotes time and space to shape the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and special relationships that are artistically expressed” (p. 84) to understand “our lives as individuals and social beings” (Kim, 2016, p. 75). The benefit to chronotope deepens the understanding of the character for a reader.

This allows the readers to insert themselves into the life of the character to gain a richer understanding to the phenomena that the reader might not otherwise experience.

Thirdly, Bakhtin (1981) refers to carnival as another way to understand individuals. Kim (2016) compared carnival to the masks that individuals wear to disguise their identity from others. Those individuals that feel marginalized and silenced by society can voice their concerns and expressions that otherwise, would go unheard in society (Kim, 2016). Anonymity can provide the courage and strength needed for some oppressed groups to give themselves a voice in society.

Therefore, in order to build an understanding to a phenomenon of interest, Cohler (1982) views narratives as “the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present and anticipated future” (p. 207). The narratives I have recorded are the products of individual interviews, field notes, focus groups, and writing prompts, thereby forming a triangulation of data sources. Knowledge acquired in multiple ways allows the researcher to journey “through another place and bring(s) back to a scholarly audience tales of what he or she has learned about the lives of people” (Josselson, 2013).

As both researcher and participant in this study, I experienced a dual role. I discovered I could never become a full participant because I was always in control of the data and continually viewed it from a researcher’s perspective. The ‘Researcher’s Reflection’ added to the end of each participant’s interview allowed me to interject my voice as a widow but also how I understood the participant’s narrative as the researcher.

Participants

Participants were recruited through various options such as university bulletin board postings, Oklahoma State's SONA system, support groups, or through word of mouth. Each participant was required to sign a consent form in order to participate in the study. This consent form also provided why and for what purpose the study was taking place. While no danger or risk was foreseen in this research, the participants were made aware of the need to share a sensitive topic (the identity transition that results after the death of a spouse) with the researcher.

In order to yield insight into widowhood, a purposive sampling of participants was required for this study. Patton (2002) equates qualitative research with participants selected purposely for the study in order to study the phenomena investigated. In qualitative research, "the researcher's intent is to describe a particular context in depth, not to generalize to another context or population" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 104). For this study, I included seven participants, including myself, in my research sample, knowing that it was not uncommon for a few to discontinue or drop out of a study for various reasons. However, no widow discontinued with the study. Participants' age ranged between 40 – 65 years old, as this segment of the population was considered past childbearing age, and in the context of midlife stages. This age range provided a context when children (if the widow had them) were typically older and not considered as dependent on their mother. I selected this particular age range, as it reflected my own identity. I felt I could identify better with this age group than that compared to young mothers who experienced a different set of responsibilities in taking care of small

children or that of older widows who were perhaps more limited in their options to change their life through education or various other means.

While all widows may experience hardship and sadness due to loss, different age ranges may reflect different views of life. For example, younger in age widows may become solely responsible for raising children or forced to work due to financial difficulty while older widows may select to travel, to care for grandchildren, or tend to a garden. The middle-aged group of widows will perhaps experience a desire to discover something for themselves, fulfill an old dream, or discover who they are as individuals as I discovered about myself. This idea may be generated due to the number of years they face ahead of them in life and the available time to do something they always wished. Since I belong to this age group, my position was directed toward obtaining a doctorate degree. An educational goal, desire, and dream allowed me to continue pursuing it. Patton (2002) would refer to this type of sampling as purposeful because “they are information rich and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population” (p. 40). For this reason, I also selected participants who were citizens of the United States because of a greater likelihood of familiarity to Western thoughts and customs.

Participant selection was not limited to those widows remarried or involved in a new relationship at the time of this study, as they had still experienced the wife-to-widow transitional process. One participant shared a new relationship to a widower she had developed recently. Therefore, additional information was generated from the data as to if and how a new relationship helped in her transition process. In addition, the purposive

sample was selected based on being a student in education after becoming a widow, as either a first time or returning adult student to participate in this study as the experiences of education may add knowledge to the identity transition process of widows.

The participants resulted in being Caucasian, heterosexual, and similar in age. Other categories of diversity were not included in the participants' characteristics due to feasibility issues. The widows who decided to participate in this study just happened to have shared these characteristics. While I presumed one participant may be higher in economic status, this was merely an assumption on my part. There was no clear evidence of financial status or class, although the absence of severe financial hardship stories made me think that all participants were at least middle class.

Participant solicitation included support groups or with the snowballing technique of word of mouth. Originally, I had nine widows who agreed to the study excluding myself, but two dropped out due to personal reasons. Participant recruitment included advertising in both email format and flyers at nearby universities and widow support groups. Participants were found through various church and community support groups such as the YWCA, non-profits or hospital groups around the Tulsa area. The location of the interview was determined in consultation with the participant.

Data Collection

This study originated with data collected from one-on-one interviews, field notes, writing prompts, demographic face pages, focus groups, and the researcher's journal.

Initially, I sent emails to organizations that hold widow support groups or have knowledge of other groups that exist. I then proceeded to contact the group leader

through email to introduce myself, the study's purpose, and permission to attend a meeting. I then inquired if any widows in these groups met the criteria of entering education after becoming a widow. If the group leader was unaware of this information, I attended a meeting to inquire myself. At this time, I introduced myself, the purpose of the study, and asked if there are any participants who would like to participate in this study. I also inquired if those members knew of someone else who might like to participate, such as in the word of mouth process. If so, they or the person they know were given my phone number and OSU email address in order to contact me. If necessary, I would have also recruited from the OSU SONA and/or TCC (Tulsa Community College) list-serve options to solicit potential participants through emails.

My next step consisted of making contact individually with each woman who agreed to participate in this study through email. I then asked if they would read and agree to the Participant Consent Form and complete the Demographic Face Page. These documents were electronically returned through email by some participants. Once they responded with their agreement to participate in this study, I coordinated a time to meet for the interview. They were provided ample time preceding the interview or before the interview to ask questions or address any concerns that they may have.

A Creative Writing Prompt (Appendix C) was also included in the email before the interview took place. This was sent after the initial email. I knew of their acceptance or possible decline to participate in the study before I sent this document to them. Each participant who agreed to participate in this study was given the opportunity to contribute to her information with a writing prompt. The prompt provided an opportunity for the participant to express her experiences by using a poem, story, song, or drawing. The

writing prompt preceded the scheduled interview. Two participants returned their creative expression (via email) before the interview and one participant also emailed additional material after the interview was completed. I preferred this document to be returned via electronic means before the interview so I could adjust my questions to the individual if needed. These materials were included in chapters IV and V, after their respective interview transcriptions.

When meeting for one-on-one interviews and not having received the participant's consent form and demographic information, I first explained the study and procedures. If they agreed verbally, then I asked them to read and sign the Participant Consent Form. In addition, I asked them to fill out the Demographic Face Page. The participant was provided the opportunity to ask questions or discuss any concerns she might have. In addition, I asked for her Creative Writing Prompt and included her explanation of it within the transcription.

Approximately ten open-ended questions provided the individuals the freedom to elaborate and expand on their answer (Appendix D). Designed to promote the expansion of participant's stories, interview questions can explore life experiences. Considered as a primary tool by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), interviews have "the potential to elicit rich, thick descriptions" (p. 121) that increases the data information. While an interview design allows the reader to view the line of questions planned for the study, research deals with humans and again, those memories that surface during the data collection may lead to other life experiences not referred to in the initial set of questions. The interview guide serves as a general reminder to the researcher to stay on topic in case the participant should decline to answer a certain question or finds a question irrelevant to

her particular situation. The set of questions also adds to topics that the researcher may discover relevant to an individual and expands upon the topic to generate additional discussion. In addition, the questions serve as a method to best utilize topics due to possible existing time constraints in the interview and as Patton (2002) claims, “we interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories” (p. 341). The interviews provide a deeper level of richness in the data.

Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. This included any field notes taken manually by the researcher during the interview process. Facial characteristics, body positions, and details of the interview location provide for the reader’s ability to enter into the study as an actual observer. This descriptive information enables the reader to have the ability to increase understanding of the participant’s story. Individual interviews continued to be the basic and most informative methods to obtain information from participants. Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) describe the interview as “a fundamental tool in qualitative research” (p. 121) while Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the interview as an “attempt to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of the subject’s experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 1). Each interview lasted approximately 45-90 minutes.

Field notes taken during the interview process and focus group provided additional insight into the widow’s story and experiences. Patton (2002) describes the value in field notes as “the chance to learn things that people would be unwilling to talk about in an interview” (p. 263). This insight may appear in slight remarks, facial expressions, deep sighs, or any number of other inferences that may present themselves during the study. These nuances may also generate additional questions to incorporate

into the conversation with the participants that provided additional details in the data. I included in the transcribed notes the physical setting where the interview took place, such as table/chair placement, surrounding, etc. This allows the reader to become a part of the actual interview process and gain a clearer perspective of the interview.

One focus group was originally planned for those participants who agreed to meet and discuss widowhood. However, due to the wishes of the participants, none agreed to meet together in a focus group setting. Through a general conversation amongst widows, information could have been shared and discussed that might have evoked additional memories useful in the data collection. In addition, a focus group could develop member friendships that will continue after the study participation has expired. Each participant was encouraged to share in the focus group her creative writing prompt or simply participate in the conversation.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explain focus groups as an additional method to not only aid in triangulation quality but to represent “a group discussion focused on a single theme where the goal is to create a candid conversation that addresses, in depth, the selected topic” (p. 123). The focus group for this study might have helped the members to share resources, engage in conversation, and develop new friendships with each other. Also, it is common to forget certain life experiences until general conversation prompts the memory. For this reason, a focus group may have promoted conversation among the members that provides additional data for the study such as forgotten experiences not previously shared during the interview process, what advice they might give to new widows, or perhaps a shared member discussion of widow journeys. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) continue to explain focus groups as “flexible tools . . . that addresses, in

depth, the selected topic . . . fosters a range of opinions . . . *and* understanding of the issues” (p. 123). One such focus group was planned for this study dependent on the participants schedules and agreement to participate and was expected to last 45-90 minutes in length.

Participants were provided the opportunity to read their transcription to ensure accuracy or to expound on certain points if they felt necessary with a Member Check. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checks help ensure the accuracy of the transcripts and allows for the possibility for participants to comment or even disagree on the interpretation made by the researcher during the interview process. Any researcher confusion may have necessitated an additional interview to clarify possible misunderstandings. However, no additional interviews were required. As Josselson (2013) explicitly states, “the report the researcher creates from the interview will represent ‘a truth’ rather than ‘the truth,’ and the researcher will assume interpretive authority for his or her understanding of the meanings of the interview material” (p. 178). This allows the researcher to make a discovery that even the participant is not aware exists and therefore, become the responsibility of the researcher to include in the final data findings (Josselson, 2013). Two participants requested to read their transcripts. The transcript was electronically emailed to them with a requested date to reply to any concerns they might have. Neither participant responded with any concerns.

If at any time, the participant wished to decline from this study during the process and/or change, delete, or expound on their member check transcript information, they were allowed to do so. In addition, she was always provided the opportunity to ask questions during the entire course of this study. If a sufficient number of participants

were not available from support groups or by word of mouth, I intended to use university bulletin boards and/or university email means to post invitations for this study. However, participants were found within support groups and by word of mouth for this study.

Lastly, as earlier mentioned in chapter I, I am also a widow. During this research process, I planned to maintain a journal with notes and reflections concerning how this study affected me on a personal level. It helped to bring additional awareness to my own set of circumstances and perhaps provided additional information to the study or the ability to expound on the stories of others. The importance for the researcher is to be aware of potential biases and contexts that she brings into the interpretation process and journaling may help in the discovery of these (Josselson, 2013). If nothing else, journaling provided additional closure for myself in a seeming like never-ending transition journey from wife to widow. I included a ‘researcher’s reflection’ after each widow’s story in chapters IV, V, and VI to inform the reader what I, as the researcher, discovered about myself during this process.

Data Analysis

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stress the importance to ‘chunk data’ into manageable parts to smoothly “provide an overall integrated and holistic presentation” (136). Coding and comparisons of data promote an understanding of the study’s phenomena and is an important component in qualitative research.

My initial focus concentrated on the individual stories to ensure I had a complete understanding of what each widow communicated through her story before I could start to find patterns and themes for the entire data collection. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012)

advise researchers “to approach your transcripts with an open mind, seeking what emerges as significant from the text” (p. 137) or as Seidman (2006) suggests, “let the interview breathe and speak for itself” (p. 100). As certain themes emerge, if any, the researcher continually rereads and reviews each transcript. Individual thoughts need containment in contexts that further lead into themes and patterns. This approach Patton (2002) refers to as the bottom-up approach in the discovery of information pertinent in one’s data collection. This inductive approach also appears in the data collected from the field notes. Individual statements made, writing prompts, agreements, and differences all require a logical approach to discover any patterns or emerging themes. In order to retain an openness to new discoveries, the researcher constantly adjusts to new concepts that may emerge in the course of the study. Eventually, the data should reflect patterns and themes.

I shared the stories of several women in narrative form originally to give them a voice concerning their experiences as widows. Once themes emerged oriented towards the influences of a patriarchal and capitalist society, a feminist lens became my tool to understand the influences of social norms and traditions for the data analysis. A widow does not only experience the grief of the death of her spouse but in addition, she experiences societal difficulties as a widow. These combinations of variables were instrumental in understanding the multiple effects on widowhood.

A narrative analysis was used to delve deeper into an issue with a purpose to increase understanding and meaning to experiences. This analysis emphasized the stories shared by individuals as one way to understand these experiences. Life stories are rich in information. However, stories remain flexible and differ among individuals that

ultimately lead the researcher according to Chase (2005). The participant needs a voice to communicate her experiences in order to generate understanding from society. Narrative analysis creates a community of members that share in such a common understanding. Without a means to share information through emotions, behaviors, and thoughts, we lose the ability to understand others. Understanding is not restricted to generational or cultural differences, per se, but highlights the complexity of the issue involved.

Ethical Considerations

The protection and confidentiality of research participants is a vital concern to the researcher both professionally and personally. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explain the researcher's responsibility "for both informing and protecting respondents . . . involves enlisting voluntary cooperation, and it is a basic premise that participants are informed about the study's purpose" (p. 124). In order to further protect the identity of participants, each individual had the opportunity to use a pseudonym for identification purposes used in the analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the study. No participant requested a pseudonym for herself or family members.

A separate file was kept for each participant during the study. The following items were contained within each file:

- Electronic transcripts of interviews
- Written format of each interview
- Consent form along with the demographic face page that contained gender, age, education, ethnicity, and

- Documents such as the writing prompt, field notes, or any copied document that were brought to the interview by the participant (letters, notes, pictures, etc.)

I began the transcription process directly after each interview took place, as this approach proved most beneficial to remember any field notes taken during the actual interview. Part of a researcher's responsibilities is to be aware of her data and keep it as organized as possible. This includes making back-up copies, securing the information, and ensuring identity confidentiality.

All written materials such as transcribed interviews, field notes, notes, consent forms, and tape-recorded interview sessions were locked in a file cabinet at my home office during the course of the research and analysis. The demographic face pages were kept separate from the interview transcriptions but also physically secured so anonymity was ensured. One year after the presentation of this study, all materials identifiable to the study's participants will be destroyed.

Due to the sensitivity of the widowhood topic, I needed to remain constantly aware of the possible emotions that might have generated from my participants. The options to stop the interview, reschedule, or even discontinue participation in the study were choices provided to her. If she had wished, we would have stopped for a break or rescheduled for another day and time. The rationale behind this thought is the possibility it may be difficult for the participant to talk about widowhood initially. However, no participant requested to not continue her interview or postpone for another day. In addition, I gathered available resources such as books on widowhood and support group

contacts that could provide her with additional information to help in her wife-to-widow transition. Of course, the option to pursue those resources will be her decision alone.

As the researcher of this study and a widow who has experienced the wife-to-widow transition, I intended to be honest with my participants about the reason for this study and that I am also widowed. I did not, however, divulge my personal experiences until after the interview and focus group had ended and only then, if she inquired. I believe knowing my story beforehand might have led the participant away from her own reality if she heard my experiences first before narrating hers. For this reason, she did not presume to answer questions or divulge information about her own experiences that she may think I wanted to hear or wanted to be similar to mine. I felt this provided for honest data collection and the study's purpose.

I also believed since I am a widow, this may have made the interviewing process easier for the participant. She conversed with someone not only who was researching this topic but experienced widowhood personally. This level of familiarity may have made the sharing of information easier for her. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explain this type of relationship between researcher and participant as a method to learn from the participants along with the researcher's views. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) continued with "the final product usually advocates for the needs of the group or suggests changes in society as to address the needs of the group" (p. 32). Empathy, commonality, and understanding of widowhood may have allowed the participant to feel she was in a safe environment and can speak freely.

Trustworthiness

The researcher's responsibilities consist more than only validity and reliability in the study but also include "trustworthiness features . . . in seeking to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study" (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 125). For the sake of this study, I made every possible effort to address trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability issues. This meant being systematic in the recruitment of participants, in interviewing, and in analysis. Researchers have the responsibility to be aware of possible biases that can occur during any part of the study such as ensuring the credibility of data findings, transferability of rich and thick data as broad contexts. These responsibilities become the researcher's focus in the study.

Member Checks: One method to ensure against researcher influences in understanding the data was member checking. Only two participants were receptive to the opportunity to member check the transcription. However, neither expressed any concerns or desired edits concerning the transcription. Not only do member checks determine an accurate understanding on the researcher's part but they allow the participant to address any confusion for the researcher.

Triangulation: Qualitative research usually consists of large amounts of data. In order to increase the value of the study, multiple ways to collect the data should be considered. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) believe "triangulation of data collection methods . . . lends credibility" (p. 113). This study utilized not only one-on-one interviews but also demographic face pages, writing prompts, field notes, and lastly, member checks.

Reflexivity: Researchers who perform research can view the data through various theoretical lens that results in different interpretations of the findings. While this is quite common in the analysis stage, the researcher remains responsible for “issues of authenticity, reactivity, and how the observational process may have affected what was observed” (Patton, 2002, p. 301). Since I kept a journal during the course of this study to reflect on any personal thoughts or feelings experienced, I was able to reference and critically reflect on possible self-thoughts presented during the data collection and analysis phases. The journal represented yet an additional checkpoint in the triangulation process to ensure the highest credibility in my research as possible.

Limitations

The solicitation for study participants initially concentrated from one geographical region—the South and Midwest. While a select group of participants were interviewed for this study, the time allotted for writing a dissertation does not easily allow for a multitude of participants especially for a qualitative research design or the inclusion of those individuals from many different geographical locations who may represent various cultures, religions, or economic groups. In addition, due to two participants not living within proximity of the researcher, two interviews took place via telephone. Not seeing the participant’s face provides limited information on the participant’s personality.

I selected a research population between 40 – 65 years old, resided in United States, and pursuing education after the death of their spouse. The diversity of the participants in this research lacked such characteristics as class, race, sexuality, religion,

socioeconomic status, and ability. I did not place such restrictions on my participants; however, the outcome happened to result in a group of widows with similar characteristics such as being Christian (except for one who was Buddhist), heterosexual, and of similar age. While participants experienced different realities, the implication of the study resulted in unique stories by the individuals involved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The many experiences reflected in this study enlarged the scope of multiple realities in widowhood.

Chapter Summary

The design choice for this study followed a constructionist/interpretative approach due to the uniqueness and diversity of the participants' stories. In this study, widows (women) each shared personal stories related to educational experiences after becoming a widow.

Interviews, journaling, field notes, focus groups, and writing prompts became methods to obtain information for this study. In addition, I hoped to understand the experiences education provides in how widows define themselves and their identity in society. My hope was to understand the role education could play in forming and reinforcing resiliency, autonomy, and life meaning for widows.

In each of the following three chapters, I will introduce two of the six participants. I paired participants according to the similarity of time since they became widows. Jennifer and Sherry were widowed the shortest time while Beth and Linda had experienced several years as widows. Lastly, Vicki and Brenda had been widowed the

longest time. Chapters IV, V, and VI contain two narratives each that includes Jennifer and Sherry, Beth and Linda, and lastly, Vicki and Brenda.

CHAPTER IV

WIDOW NARRATIVES

The narratives of seven women, including myself, are portraits of our experiences of becoming widows and the new understandings this identity brings into our lives. As far as those details that I have personally experienced as a widow, I only shared this information with the three participants that asked me and only after their completed interviews. I did not want to risk skewing any data they might believe I wanted them to say or not say during their interview.

At the time of becoming a widow, the ages of these participants ranged from 24 to 63 years. These women's ages are now, at the time of this study, between 46 to 65 years. Each participant has been a widow for a different length of time and has experienced varied situations along the way. Her time as a widow varies from 11 months to almost 40 years. The years married for each widow also varies from as little as three years to almost forty years. Sherry is the only participant that has been married before and this marriage represents her second one.

Half of the participants continue to work or volunteer outside the home while three of the women currently continue with educational pursuits. All of my participants have at least a Bachelor's Degree, if not additional education, and all are Caucasian. I

perceived the women to represent the middle class socioeconomic group with the exception of two widows, Linda, who made reference to her “big house,” which had “an acre yard” and Jennifer, who had been a stay-at-home mom for fourteen years. However, this was only an assumption on my part.

For the other widows, I assumed their SES (socioeconomic status) position from how they were dressed, accessorized, and car make and model, but again, this is merely an assumption on the part of the researcher. The majority of participants reside in Oklahoma while the other two live in Texas and Indiana.

All of the widows had grown children at the time of widowhood except for Jennifer who has two early teens, 13 and 14 years old and Brenda who remains childless. Some participants are now grandmothers. Common experiences of these seven widows address social perceptions, emotionality, identity transitions, future-plans, advice to new widows, and the widowhood journey itself. Although additional variables require consideration for comparison of these seven widows, the wide age difference and time since entering widowhood do provide insight into the intersectionality of life stages, ages, and widowhood experiences.

The stories of the following participants reflected how the widow perceived societal reactions to death, children and family support, personal experiences, self-identity, spirituality, advice for new widows, and the education or employment she sought for the future. Chapters IV, V, and VI contain the participants’ narratives and are divided according to the participant’s length of time as a widow.

JENNIFER & SHERRY

I begin with Jennifer's story. She was the only widow who had been widowed less than a year and had young children, ages 13 and 14. At age 46, Jennifer had been a stay-at-home mom and unemployed since the birth of her oldest child. Married for almost 24 years Jennifer had a bachelor's degree but had recently decided to pursue an additional degree in computer science.

Sherry's story follows. A 65-year-old woman married for seven years in her second marriage had been a kindergarten teacher her entire career. She was the next participant widowed for the shortest time of 16 months. Sherry enjoyed her adult children, grandchildren, and planned to continue taking professional development classes to enhance her bachelor's degree in elementary teaching.

Jennifer's Journey

He was gone. I don't know how long he had been there. I will never forget coming around the corner and um, [Jennifer cried] and yeah, I called 911 and *that woman* was trying to tell me what to do and I *yelled* at her. "I *know* CPR. I *know* what I'm doing. Just *stop* talking *at* me" and thinking how long is it going to take for them to get here. How long is it going to take? How long before the ambulance or firefighters get here?

Jennifer explained that her husband had died from a massive heart attack. When speaking to the 911 operator the day of Richard's death, she remembered yelling, "just stop talking *at* me." Jennifer used the words "*at* me" instead of "*to* me" with the operator, to signify that she was not feeling heard or appropriately responded to in this fatal moment.

Paramedic's action: "They rushed me out of the house"

Jennifer's reaction to the day Richard died continued to cause her great sadness. Returning home from running errands, the last thing Jennifer expected to experience was the tragic scene that changed her life forever.

I came home and I said, "where's your dad?" He [Jennifer's son] said, "I don't know. I think he's upstairs." So, I went upstairs and I'll never forget coming around the corner. He was gone. I don't know how long he had been there. He was already dead and I think that the paramedics knew that when they got there. [Jennifer wiped away her tears with a napkin] I really am very upset with the paramedics because I believe they were putting on a show. They knew he was gone [Jennifer cried]. They were putting on a show and I don't like that. Why did you do that? If you did that for me, I don't appreciate it. That irritates me [because] he was gone. He was already gone. In a way, I knew that but later when I talked [to] my brother-in-law. [He] is a firefighter and my sister is a volunteer [Jennifer hesitated] they, they have paramedic training, and he was gone. *They rushed me out [of the house]* . . . they transported him to the hospital without the siren but they sent me ahead. They said, 'you just go ahead and to, to the hospital

and we'll meet you there'. Well, it took them a long time to get there and when they got there, there was . . . they did not have the siren on and I said . . . they knew he was gone. [Jennifer stopped crying when she expressed her anger towards the paramedics]

Jennifer seemed to know that Richard "was already gone" before the paramedics arrived at her house. She believed they "were putting on a show" and wanted her out of the house first. Jennifer's anger increased when she realized "they did not have the siren on" as she waited at the hospital for them to arrive.

She continued:

He [Richard] was 48. He was a month shy of his 49th birthday. Um but, but he was, he was pigheaded and he was [Jennifer's quiet] he [Jennifer cried] . . . He had been diagnosed with Atrial Fibrillation and he was under a doctor's care and he didn't listen to what the [Jennifer chuckled] he never listened to doctors. If the doctor got to a point where he was telling him more than he wanted to hear, he'd go to another doctor or he'd quit going to the doctor.

Jennifer knew her husband well enough to suspect he knew the severity of his illness but perhaps, on being "pigheaded" about not accepting it.

I asked Jennifer if she had known the severity of her husband's condition.

Well, the doctor could have told him that it was worse off than it was and [he] would never had relayed that to me. He, either he wasn't processing it and believing it or he just didn't want to worry me or whatever but it had gotten to the point where he couldn't mow the lawn. We [the children and Jennifer] had taken over and you know, I was making the kids do it but they were getting old enough.

They needed to do it anyway and he just . . . he was just [a] bull-headed pain in the butt. [Jennifer chuckled again]

Jennifer thought that Richard's denial might have also been to protect his family from worry. With Richard's illness, she and the kids were doing more chores, which she believed "they needed to do it anyway" to prepare them for adulthood. The family relieved Richard of his regular duties that demanded physical strength and energy.

Jennifer never got the chance to say 'goodbye' to her husband before he died. She had returned home from shopping to find her teenaged son in the living room playing video games the day of her husband's death. "Where's your dad?" Getting a shrug and little attention from him, she went upstairs presuming to find her husband doing 'something' around the house. As she reached the top stair, she could see down the hall into the master bedroom. There she viewed her husband on the floor next to the bed.

Jennifer, a 46-year-old widow of only 11 months, at the time of this interview, had been married one month short of 24 years. Jennifer was of medium height and build. With light brown hair worn in a ponytail, wearing jeans and a light weighted sweatshirt, Jennifer walked into the restaurant. I arrived at the restaurant early and stood in the lobby waiting for her. After our introductions, Jennifer began her story. Since the birth of her first child, Jennifer had been a stay-at-home mom who cared for her two children, now ages 13 and 14. She currently volunteered with the Girl Scouts and credited the Scout families as a source of healing for her throughout this difficult time.

Jennifer expressed her immense gratitude to the Scout families, as she had never experienced a close member of her family die. "It's always someone else. We don't have to deal with it." Death was a new experience for Jennifer. As she mentioned, before

individuals personally experienced widowhood they think, “we don’t have to deal with it.” Now, August 2nd is engrained in Jennifer’s memories as the loss of Richard.

Our interview began with Jennifer sharing the need and desire to talk about her husband with someone ‘who would listen to her story’.

Relationships: “nobody wants to talk about it”

I met with Jennifer at a local restaurant at a time when the lunch crowd was over and few people remained. Jennifer addressed her lack of make-up even before we introduced ourselves to each other. “Oh yeah, mascara has been, it’s not my friend right now. We don’t talk. We don’t talk. Sometimes I’ll put it on if I know I’m going somewhere where there is absolutely no chance [of crying].” Jennifer exuded a warm and a caring attitude in her personality. As we sat down and began the interview, her warm smile belied her hesitation to talk about an issue that she had learned is rarely invited for discussion, a topic that is typically taboo unless in company with a therapist or support group. She wanted, as I remember wanting when my husband died eight years ago, to be understood and to understand what to do next and how to act. Realizing her delicate state, I proceeded with caution and concern to provide adequate comfort for her during this interview. As Jennifer had only been a widow for 11 months, I worried this interview was perhaps too soon after the death of her husband and would cause her further distress.

No, actually I was looking forward to coming and talking. I was looking forward to talking with you. Not many people want to hear about it. I want to talk about him. This is good because it . . . *nobody wants to talk about it*. You know, I want to remember him and remember the things he does . . . or did. Whenever I bring

him up, whenever I say him or bring up his name and say, ‘Oh, he did this or he thought that way or he would do this’, and for me it’s a good memory but everyone around me will get quiet and they’ll change the subject. I think that’s more for them than it is for me.

A veil of silence surrounded Jennifer when she “bring[s] up his [Richard’s] name” in conversations. Jennifer explained these reactions as “more for them than it is for me.” While Jennifer found comfort in talking about Richard, friends appeared uneasy.

Initially, Jennifer asked about my experiences as a widow and how my spouse died soon after we sat down in the restaurant. In juxtaposition to those who avoided this topic with her, she was anxious to hear my story, which I shared at the end of our visit. “Not many people want to hear about it. Not many people want to talk about it. People just don’t want to hear about it . . . you don’t know until you’ve been there,” she said. The “*there*” Jennifer referred to was how her journey into widowhood began a short 11 months ago.

I don’t think it is negative so much as it is . . . there is just a standoffishness.

They, I don’t know if people feel. I guess having been on the other side and now being on this side, I guess, you know looking back, there’s an uncomfortableness.

I think when it first happened, people were afraid to bring it up because they didn’t want me to cry and make me feel bad and now maybe they don’t want themselves to feel bad . . . and it does, you know, it makes me cry . . . and I’m sure it will make me cry five to ten years down the road. People just don’t want to hear about it. People don’t like to talk about it so they all try to change the

subject. I think they think they're going to have to deal with this crying woman.

[Jennifer slightly smiled and looked down at her barely touched food]

Jennifer seemed to understand why others did not want to talk about death. She knew they did not wish to upset her or make her cry but they also appeared to not want to feel bad themselves with such conversations. For Jennifer, it seemed as if friends preferred silence rather than talking about Richard.

They don't know what my journey is. They don't know where I am so they don't want to bring things up. I think they feel more uncomfortable than I do and I think as a society, we need to understand that you know, it's, it's helpful for people to be able to talk about and remember and tell stories about. You don't know my journey and I don't know yours. We just need to be sympathetic toward each other.

Jennifer appeared adamant that other individuals should not compare their situations to hers. So adamant that she expressed that "they don't know what my journey is. They don't know where I am." Jennifer seemed to separate her experiences of death from those of others. She considered the difficult responsibilities of raising two children by herself now along with future age issues she may develop. She did not fit what she thought was the stereotypical image of what widows might look like: "a little old lady with grey hair and a cane in a black dress who um, the kids are grown." She had a need to share her experiences and memories, and when she did, she found it comforting .

As Jennifer's intensity of crying increased and she paused in telling her story, I sensed she was about to share something with me that caused her additional pain and grief. She began to talk about her status of no longer being married.

. . . that thing about not being married [Jennifer cried] is the hardest. I know I'm not married. I know I'm not married because Jesus says there's no marriage in heaven and as much as I'd like to think so, I know he's not up there waiting for me. He's having a good time on his own. [Jennifer cried harder].

Seeing other couples was as a reminder to what she no longer had.

I'm still in that jealous stage and I know I need to get out of that. Older couples who I see walking and holding hands or [Jennifer became silent] and that's really hard [Jennifer cried]. I think one of the . . . that thing about not being married [Jennifer continued to cry] is the hardest. I need time because it still bothers me.

Coming to terms with her new status as “widow” instead of “married,” her tears demonstrated her deep longing to be with Richard. Her religious faith was instrumental in her coming to terms with her identity-in-transition. She anticipated that time would help resolve her fears and jealousy of other couples. While Jennifer realized her jealousy of others, it remained difficult to accept their relationships and accept her identity as “not married” or widow.

Jennifer contemplated an unknown future alone. She expressed concerns to aging problems such as living alone and the possibility of declining health. She wondered how she would financially manage if her health should deteriorate.

When I get older, if I do end up with health problems . . . that is really one of the things that bothers me. I'm going to be 60, 70, 75 years old and maybe even have to work longer. I don't know. I don't know how long I'll have to work because I can't, I don't have . . . that's the other thing, I don't have . . . who's going to support me when I'm . . . sick?

Jennifer's fears of the future seemed to fill her with anticipated dread. Richard had always been the person she relied on but now Jennifer was alone.

Holidays: "I'm jealous for my children"

Jennifer's anger surfaced during the holidays. Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, anniversaries, and, of course, Christmas advertisements entice shoppers with gift ideas. In Jennifer's situation, the holidays reminded her of the gift giving from Richard.

Uh, families. I hate jewelry commercials. I hate jewelry commercials" [Jennifer slightly laughed and began to cry while I searched for tissues in my purse].

Of course, the holidays so difficult, especially with the kids. I'm feeling their pain with mine. I'm jealous for my children. It's hard on them. Father's Day was . . .

on a Sunday and that was, that was a really hard holiday for me. [Jennifer cried]

We went to Sunday School that day but we didn't go to church because they have fathers . . . and you know.

Television commercials around holiday time were a reminder of her and Richard's special life moments. Father's Day, yet another holiday reminder for Jennifer, brought back additional memories and increased the uncomfortableness for her children. Holidays and advertisements about holidays haunted Jennifer with past memories.

Comparison to other widows: "Our journeys are different"

Jennifer's pastor advised her to attend a grief support group that would provide not only counseling but also companionship. Attending grief support groups sometimes

two or three times a week, seemed to provide Jennifer with comfort. At last, Jennifer seemed less lonely.

People are there for all different reasons. You know, some have lost their parents, some lost their child. There's two, two other women in the group who lost husbands but for us to sit and talk about our loved one. For us [Jennifer's *grief support members*] to talk and, and the funny thing is, none of us feel uncomfortable because *our journeys are different*. But we know that it's ok and when we can get to that point where we can laugh about, you know, good memories and stuff like that, then . . . then, we're healing so I just wish other people around me could understand that but if you've not, if you've not done it, you don't know.

Support groups for Jennifer appeared to be the outlet she needed to talk freely about Richard with people who understood grief. They too had experienced death in their lives. Jennifer was now able to cry among others without being judged.

My children: "I'm supposed to be taking care of them"

While Jennifer searched for her own comfort, she also remained cognizant of her children's needs. Jennifer questioned, "What did it mean 'to take care of' your children when they have lost their dad?" Jennifer wanted to be at home when her son and daughter were not in school. Even though both were teenagers, a daughter of 14 and a son of 13, Jennifer seemed to suffer from guilt when she left them home alone.

I still do have guilt . . . like Tuesday nights when I go to my grief share group. I

have this . . . I shouldn't be leaving my kids [at home alone]. There's this pull of responsibility even though they're 13 and 14. They're perfectly fine to stay home by themselves. I'm never more than a phone call away but there's still a guilt. You know, the neighbors are there and the neighbors know that they might come to them. They're perfectly safe but there's still a guilt. *I'm supposed to be taking care of them.*

When Jennifer left her children home alone to attend her support groups, she appeared to experience a sense of guilt. Although she mentioned, "I'm never more than a phone call away," Jennifer feared the worst could happen if left by themselves. With the responsibility of raising two teenagers by herself, Jennifer shared that her 13-year old son was autistic and sometimes difficult to handle.

My son [has] got an older sister and a mom who are going, 'Man, you smell bad. You need to go put on deodorant'. You know, he doesn't have a dad to say, 'Ok son, [Jennifer sniffed] this is how you shave or this is how you do this or you got to make sure what girls will like.' It's hard for me to relate to my daughter and my son trying to work through this. So, we're working it out. We're getting there.

We're, we're braver.

She realized that her grief was different from her children. Jennifer found it difficult to explain and to help them process their own grief.

While Jennifer's children have depended on their Scout families to help with their grief, she tried to find comfort in the Scout parents. Jennifer continued to benefit from the Scout relationships for household and car problems after Richard's death. However,

Jennifer appeared to limit her Scout involvement to only the girls. Richard had been the one to be involved with the boys. Jennifer explained the mixed messages she had received from each group and the reason she has distanced herself from the boys.

He [Richard] knew different people than I knew. I get that around some of the Scout families especially the Boy Scouts. Not the Girl Scouts because that was *my* group, but his job was Boy Scouts and I get *that* around some of the Boy Scout families. They knew him better than they knew me. So, *I'm still Richard's wife*. I'm not Jennifer or I'm Joey's mom. I would like to transition into my own identity. It's just a whole, it's just you know, it wasn't what we planned but it's like camping, it may not be . . . you may have intended to go out and camp with the whole week sunny and do this, that or the other and it starts raining and you just make do. You figure it out and we will figure it out. God's been good to us. He has provided us with a dad who provided abundantly for us before he left. Thank God for social security. We're able . . . *I'm* able to stay home with them and not have to immediately go back into the work place. I've been able to take the time I need to sort myself out.

Among the Boy Scouts members, Jennifer's self-identity appeared to be limited to "Richard's wife" or "Joey's mom." Jennifer added, "they knew him (Richard) better than they knew me." Jennifer seemed to want to change this perception with the Boy Scouts but was not sure she was ready.

Strength & Hope: “By talking to God”

A major part of Jennifer’s process of being okay depended upon spiritual faith. She spoke with a serious tone and facial expression while she elaborated on the support and guidance she felt “by talking to God” about her future worries. “I, I think God doesn’t give us more than we can handle. Well, obviously, He knew I couldn’t handle it because I, I didn’t have any . . . [Jennifer cried and did not finish her sentence].” Jennifer appeared to pray to God for courage in widowhood and motherhood. While she realized, “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle,” she appeared to experience moments of self-doubt in her abilities to do as God wished in daily life.

Learning on one’s own: “Now it’s all my job”

Without Richard around to fix things, Jennifer at first felt helpless and then looked to her parents for help and also tried to do more herself. Her 70-year-old dad had recently helped Jennifer install a new dishwasher in her house and Jennifer had fixed two sinks by herself.

But we did it and that’s the thing. Well, at first, it was everything broke down and it was sit in your puddle and cry and be upset and be angry at *him* because, because I relied on *him* and *he’s* not here to do it. It was *his* job with that. Well, *now it’s all my job.*

For Jennifer, the installation of a new dishwasher and the fixing of sinks helped her to become more independent. Eleven months ago, she would never have attempted such chores around the house simply because she was accustomed to her husband taking care of them.

I can do these things. I can and if I need to, I can call someone. I can do it. I don't, I don't have to have *him*. Sometimes I wonder how do these women do it? How do these women who never had a husband, how do they do it? They learned. I'm going to learn."

Self-independency appeared to be a new experience for Jennifer. Her courage to confront new experiences seemed to provide her with strength. Jennifer compared herself with other single women with, "they learned. I'm going to learn." Jennifer seemed prepared to tackle new issues first before she resorted to ask others for help. However, there were other areas where Jennifer still expressed fear, such as the family's financial security. She realized the financial responsibilities to raise and educate two children were now hers. "I still have to get two kids into college and through college." Jennifer feared what the future may hold for them.

Education and employment: "I have to find a new world"

Jennifer felt a certain amount of fear about being able to find employment for the family's financial security.

Well, yeah, I mean right now the only opportunity I have is to go in as a receptionist or as a secretary for somebody I know that feels sorry for me. I hope to be a student [be]cause I just think that's, that's the way to go for me [be]cause if I don't change, if I don't do something soon I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going to be stuck and I think that's . . . [Jennifer cried], [be]cause he was my world. So now, *I have to find a new world* and it's going to be very . . . it will be fun to go through college . . . go through school. [Jennifer cried]

Jennifer's world had changed and she needed to do something soon because she was "just going to be stuck." Education was her answer.

Jennifer, however, had never considered education to be a "stumbling block." She experienced some instances where employers were seeing her as overqualified and this became a barrier to her employment.

I finished my bachelor's before my kids were born so I've always had that and I never thought it would be a stumbling block for people to hire me. I think by having more education, by having a certification of some type it's going to be a lot easier for me to find work whether I have recent experience or not because I have recent education. . . I know education in and of its self, just being there and networking and just the experience, the learning of it, there will be more opportunities for internships or, [a] work-study.

Jennifer wanted to pursue a certificate in computers and felt this plan best suited her family's lifestyle. She could work from home and be there for her children.

Jennifer assumed that education was vital to change her financial security. While she mentioned the growth that education would provide her, she also admitted to not having a choice now that Richard was gone.

But yes, I do know that but I know that going back to school will help me grow. It's going to take me . . . from being a full time mom to my children to being a part time mom, full time worker. It's going to be a gradual transition but it will help me grow. . . I don't have a choice.

Jennifer appeared to begrudge choosing between employment and remaining a full time mother. She identified herself foremost as a mother and did not connect her identity to a job.

Jennifer seemed to feel the strain of trying to find employment with that of being a full-time mother.

I've applied through several agencies. I've applied directly. If I get a call, usually I don't get a call but if I do get a call, it's you know, they're concerned about the time [14 years as a stay-at-home mom]. I keep hearing when I do go on interviews, they say, "You don't have enough recent experience" or because I have a bachelor's degree, I'm over qualified. If I had of gone back to work, even though I haven't been out in the work place, I'm over qualified. I think I would [Jennifer hesitated] the guilt of not being there for my kids, would have been overwhelming. And not to have to worry about, to worry now that they're home from school, now what are they doing. I'm supposed to be taking care of them . . . so, if I started a job, I would have probably been fired by now.

She appeared to feel both anger and dismay when she considered the reactions of potential employers. She downplayed her abilities to obtain employment due to predictions in how potential employers would view her.

All they see is that I haven't sat behind a desk and answered a phone for 14 years. All the years I worked, and during that time, I worked for our church as a preschool teacher . . . that doesn't mean *anything* even though I did get paid. That doesn't matter to them. The fact that I volunteered the last nine years, five of those years at the executive level with the Girl Scouts, planning, organizing, and

training, working in development, and recruitment. That doesn't matter to them because it was a volunteer position even though, you know, there are people that did what I did and got paid a lot of money. I didn't get paid because it wasn't an official position. They don't take into consideration that during that 14 years, not only did I chauffeur, nurse, counsel, and organize my children and their schedules and my own and you know, I was the one to pay the bills. I was the one who executed the budget. We didn't have 50 years together. We didn't have a retirement plan. There's not a house that's paid for [Jennifer sighed deeply] that I can live out my years in. I still have a house payment. I don't have a car payment but sooner or later, I will. Even though I haven't been out in the workplace, I'm over qualified. I know I have to work . . . that's just an obstacle that younger widows have . . . is that they have to continue to work.

Being a young widow with a house payment, an upcoming car payment, along with other responsibilities, Jennifer did not foresee another alternative than to increase her employability by pursuing more education.

Advice: "Share your passwords"

Jennifer had several pieces of advice for new widows that may make their grief journey easier. Her first was a very practical one, "*Share your passwords* before they die. [we both laughed] Look through those silly passwords and write them down before you die." Since the interview had taken a lighter tone from our laughter about the password comment, I mentioned to Jennifer that she was probably going to have indigestion by the time we finished talking. Again, we both laughed. Jennifer had been nibbling at her food

off and on throughout the interview but with all the crying she had done, she had not eaten much of it.

I shared my story with Jennifer of changing the cable company billing information to my name after my husband's death. I asked the woman on the phone if she expected me to bring the death certificate for confirmation. Her answer was, "Yes, that would help." I told Jennifer the cable company was more difficult than dealing with the life insurance company. We both had a good laugh about the rules and regulations that a widow had to deal with in addition to the emotional distress of losing one's husband at the same time.

On a more serious note, Jennifer suggested they [new widows] have to do the next thing on the list "even if that next thing is taking a breath . . . getting out of bed and taking a shower . . . [or] changing over the cable [company]". We both giggled about that. Jennifer quickly added, "Whatever the next thing is and you've got to do that next thing and even if that next step is calling somebody and saying, 'I can't do this on my own. I need some help.'"

For the last 11 months, Jennifer had used her relationships and feelings of responsibility to her Girl Scout troop to ensure that each girl achieved the required scout goals. Though difficult due to Jennifer's grief process, she continued to uphold her scout responsibilities because they gave her someone else to focus on and distract her from her pain.

That's given me a reason to just not sit and watch TV even though TV is like the greatest thing in the world right now because you don't have to think about anything. That's given me a reason to keep going – to help those girls. I, I still, I

know I'm not a wife anymore but I'm still a mom and I'm still me. I'm still Sarah and Joey's mom. I don't want to be Richard's widow but I know I am but I think people are too uncomfortable to call me that because I'm not, I'm not that little old lady that they can compartmentalize. I still have a life. I still have my kids growing up, you know, things to go to and things to do so I'm still not and eventually, I won't be Richard's widow anymore. I'll be Jennifer. I just still catch myself saying we, us, something like that, and as the kids grow up and go on, it's going to be I, but that's going to take a long . . . [Jennifer paused] and I think maybe that's going to be an easier transition for me because I still have my kids, you know, with me. I can't imagine going from us to me overnight.

While Jennifer seemed to accept her life as a widow in her mind, her heart continued to feel married. She still had a life to live out and seemed to understand someday she "won't be Richard's widow anymore," she will have become just Jennifer. She had to achieve this self-identity for her future.

I thanked Jennifer for being so open and honest with me. I knew it was a difficult topic for her to talk about. As I offered Kleenex and a glass of water to her, I asked her if she was "okay." She expressed a look of strong surprise at my question. I felt awkward. My question was one of care but obviously not appropriate. Her surprised expression and response was, "Okay!?" We both smiled at each other in mutual understanding if a widow could ever again be *okay*.

Researcher's Reflection

After this interview, it dawned on me why I had asked Jennifer if she dreaded this interview. After all, it had only been a short 11 months for her on this widow journey. Subconsciously or perhaps consciously, I had remembered what I was like 11 months after my own husband died – an emotional basket-case. If anyone mentioned him, asked how I was doing or even gave me a sympathetic glance, I would start crying. And I am 'so not' a pretty crier. Red nosed, red eyed, with face swollen is the final outcome. I was the one who had dreaded this interview, not Jennifer. I did not want to be reminded of that first year by hearing someone else share hers.

As Jennifer was talking about some of her "firsts," it reminded me of mine. I remembered that first year as being the first of everything – birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries, and the list goes on. I remember looking forward to the one-year anniversary of my husband's death just so I did not have to think or say, "Well, this is my daughter's first birthday without her dad or this is another first as a widow." It seemed the list during that first year went on and went on. Jennifer was traveling through that first year now when a widow is always aware of the first of this or that.

However, I hope it gave Jennifer some small glimpse of hope to know that 'this too shall pass' or at least begin to become easier for her. After the interview, we hugged and I wished her the best. I also added she keeps my phone number and if she ever wanted to talk again, to just call me. I watched her out of my car window as she got into her van and backed out to drive home. She knew I had been a widow for eight years compared to her few months. So, it is my sincerest desire that while she never can forget, time does ease the pain and sorrow to some extent. As Jennifer mentioned, "I don't have

a choice.” She also acknowledges, “as much as I’d like to think so, I know he’s not up there waiting for me. He’s having a good time on his own.” This idea of non-marriage in heaven coincides with my own interpretation of what the after-life represents. Though none of us knows that for sure, I agree with Jennifer’s view. Instead, I would like to think that all souls will demonstrate a family love for each other.

My hope for Jennifer is that she will discover a peace and acceptance to the fact that her life has changed. There is no going back to what it was like before her husband’s death. I sincerely hope that she will look to the future with a speck of optimism brought to her from a strong spiritual faith and enjoy her life and children as I’m sure her husband would wish her to do.

Sherry's Journey

He was in the hospital about a month. He had had some issues, yeah, for several years. We were thinking it had to do something with Agent Orange in Vietnam and I am pursuing that through the veterans program . . . administration. Yeah. (Sherry sighed and looked downward). Heart, lungs . . . what he eventually died from [was] sepsis where his organs just shut down and during that time, it had given [me] time to realize I had lots more support than I knew before Tony got really badly sick . . . Tony was a motor cycle rider and had always said, “just scatter my ashes on highway 75.”

Sherry entered into widowhood 16 months ago at the age of 63 years. Her first marriage ended in a divorce. Tony was her second husband and they had been married for seven years when he died. Casually dressed, wearing beige capris and a green-buttoned shirt, and carrying a sweater, Sherry entered the restaurant. She mentioned, “it’s always so cold in these places.” Sherry was a petite blond-haired woman, with bright blue eyes that sparkled through her large framed glasses. She had been a kindergarten teacher for many years. Friendly, but reserved, this was our first time to meet each other after the phone call to set up the interview.

Sherry had prefaced the interview:

Well, every day I ask the Lord to put into my mouth the words He would have me say and to see things from His point of view and to do what He wants done . . . it just takes an incredible amount off my shoulders in the worry.

Sherry presented herself with grace and confidence. I could sense she was sincere in her last statement and meant it with her entire being. Sherry's facial appearance, her mannerisms, and her attitude insinuated her love and dependence on God.

Sherry recounted her marriage to Tony as one that reflected an interweaving of their work lives as well as their private lives— one of being in love.

Honeymooners. Yeah. We always thought of ourselves that way. Tony had, was divorced . . . but he had been single for 16 years when I met him and then we knew each other as friends and ministry partners for years before let's see . . . eight years before we married and then we were married for seven when he went home [at age 73]. He was already ordained and I was married at the time. I had a food and clothing ministry and so he would come and help me with my drop-offs and pick-ups and then I would go with him when he had a service, and I would help him with the music or if he had to go to the hospital to pray for somebody, I would go too. So, I helped him on the spiritual side and he helped me on the natural side [the secular, worldly side]. So, God joined that together.

Sherry explained that working in the ministry provided them both a sense of common good for the community. They worked in tandem with Sherry focusing on people's basic needs in the way of clothing and food, while Tony responded to their spiritual needs with prayer, scripture, and spiritual guidance.

Society: "Needs to be more accepting"

Sherry felt that the transition to widowhood was difficult, not only because of her loss, but because people seemed to feel awkward interacting with her, which, in turn, caused her to feel awkward.

I read a lot of books . . . about grief. I think society often wants widows to “get on with life” and just you know, just stop talking about the one that’s gone on.

[Be]cause it makes the person . . . whoever that is uncomfortable because they don’t know, if they haven’t been through it or if they really haven’t dealt with it, so it . . . puts them in an awkward position and so they are not comfortable.

Everybody wants to be comfortable. (Sherry chuckled) . . . I think everybody deals with death differently and . . . I think society “*needs to be more accepting*” of whatever . . . the person is feeling at the time . . . the person who has lost their friend, their loved one.

Sherry felt like society was not designed to allow the widow time and space for grieving.

She quickly became aware of people’s comfort levels and realized that mentioning her husband’s death was received with silence or a change of topic, thus leaving her feeling that she was not welcome unless she contributed without discussing him. Her experiences interacting with most people after his death reflects what she saw a societal norm in expecting widows’ behaviors to be quiet, reserved, and restrained. She felt that this was wrong and refused to comply.

Relationships: “An awesome role”

While Sherry struggled with societal norms around widowhood, those who were closest to her, her friends and family, were very supportive.

An awesome role . . . my friends from school came to the hospital . . . one came over and cooked me dinner right there on site in my kitchen (Sherry chuckled),

brought all the stuff. I had gifts and cards and one brought me a prayer shawl . . .

Yes. I never did feel like I was an intruder. Well, we sorta had couple friends but not like dating couples. We . . . like couple friends where we'd all go out as a group . . . we'd sometimes go to others' houses and those friends were the very friends that stepped up to help. Yes, the church was one community that helped, my school friends were another community, and the veterans were the third community. And my next door neighbor, they were just moving in and . . . we had a service where the motorcycle riders come and escort us to the cemetery and they were all in front of my house . . . and . . . so, my next door neighbor has been over and helped, helped . . . with several household type things and . . . and that was a new person. He and his wife have been tremendous.

In addition, Sherry mentioned that the four adult children from her first marriage and grandchildren were also there for her. She explained the importance of one eight-year-old grandson who lived with Sherry.

What I'm doing more now is I'm "*more in the moment*" with my grandkids. [I was] already helping with my grandson . . . and he was living with me and then after Tony left, then my daughter got into a sober living program and then she found out she was expecting. So, she couldn't stay at the program and she moved in with me and her son.

Sherry appreciated that her daughter along with her grandson moved in with her. This helped offset the aloneness she was feeling without her husband. Their company provided Sherry with the ability to focus "*more in the moment.*"

Another individual Sherry relied on was Robert. A close friend of Tony's for many years, Robert was like family. He was Tony's motorcycle buddy who he had shared in detail about his burial plans. Tony thought it was best to share with Robert to alleviate the stress for his wife.

He had asked one of his friends [Robert] to help me. So, I had uh [had] a resource during the time and during the time also when Tony did go home. (Sherry slightly smiled) Then he helped me with . . . all the different things . . . all the different decisions that you have to make. Well, when I talked to Robert and realized Tony had asked him to help me, we ended up using a military cemetery in . . . Fort Gibson and we could have the service there on site and, and there was no cost to me because he was a [Vietnam] veteran.

Sherry seemed to have a sense of security and peace as she mentioned that her burial could be alongside Tony when the time came. She did not have to worry about this as Tony had done preparations for her future as well.

Even though Sherry experienced minimal worries planning Tony's funeral, she spoke of her growth through the struggle of his death.

I think I'm not so (Sherry paused and acted as if she searched for the correct self-descriptor) co-dependent where, I, you know, it's nice if someone likes me but it used to shock me when somebody didn't like me. It was like a blow . . . and it wasn't so much ego, it was like a shock and what did I do and instead of assuming that I had done something wrong, I just assume they just had a bad moment there and I don't really have to worry about what other people think and I was raised by a real worrier. Planner, worrier and that's my vent. But it just takes all of that, it

puts that into perspective and people and, and doing for others and our serving others, our mission to serve others it becomes . . . I don't know . . . it becomes way more important. (Sherry giggled) I'm working on not worrying. Not having my brain spinning. Yeah.

I could not resist asking Sherry how the 'not-worrying' was going for her. She smiled and replied, "it's going. Some days are better than others." We both laughed and Sherry continued with, "but it works better when I just focus on the here and now instead of thinking of what I will be cooking for supper or what someone's going to need from me later . . ." Besides focusing on the "here and now," Sherry focused her energies on serving others and being grateful.

Sherry became more grateful for relationships. She looked back in time and realized that she had not utilized quality time with her family and friends, as perhaps she should have.

I turn [to] relationships. People are so important and I, I don't think . . . I knew, I know, I wasn't spending the quality time. It's more like 'who do I need to call', and you know, and to pay attention to that inner voice that's prompting me to checking on people. When someone comes to mind, I pray for them. Sometimes I pick up the phone if that's what I feel like I need to do.

Sherry seemed to demonstrate a strong reliance on her faith to provide direction in her daily life. Through this spiritual direction, she appeared to plan her day accordingly.

The men in her life: “He’s got a life”

Sherry was the only widow in my study that had been married twice. She compared divorce for her as leaving a marriage voluntarily compared to a marriage that left her through her husband’s death. She was the only participant who was currently dating someone seriously at the time of the interview. Lou was the new person in Sherry’s life. She mentioned that she would be okay whether the relationship worked out or not.

That’s the one thing that I have noticed. He [Lou] is very busy, he’s retired, and he’s widowed and yet *he’s got a life*. Both men (Tony and Lou) could carry a conversation and I could interject . . . *I like that*. (Sherry nodded her head emphatically) And both of them opened my car door. Tony *never ever* forgot . . . as long as he was there . . . unless he would say “Honey, would you get this today? I’ve got this and this today to carry in.”

Sherry’s husband was kind and respectful to Sherry. She believed he demonstrated his love for her with small acts of kindness and consideration, like opening the car door. Sherry seemed to appreciate the fact that Lou also demonstrated the manners of a gentleman.

Identity: “She’s not single, she’s a widow”

Though Sherry appreciated mannerly men, she also explained that she liked having an independent identity. Sherry described how she considered herself today.

Yea, I don’t need someone else to have an identity. Um but um, sometimes I still refer to myself as Tony’s wife but then I think, “oh, I’m Tony’s widow. And I

remember the first time that . . . my daughter had a friend over and he said, “you didn’t tell me that your mom was single” and she said, *she’s not single, she’s a widow*. (Sherry chuckled) And that didn’t even occur to me you know that my identity had changed. *Did not occur*. For me I think single would be more like I had my advertising sign on . . . like flirting and over giggling. (Sherry smiled and winked at me) Laughing at everything he says whether it’s funny or not. You know . . . that’s . . . available, available. (she waves her hands back and forth in front of her). And widowed is more. I don’t know. When I first hear the word widow, I don’t know, I think of the word “subdued.”

Until someone brought attention to Sherry that she was now single, Sherry had not thought about defining herself as such. Even Sherry’s daughter appeared to think a widow did not mean single. Sherry resorts back to how society translates widow to “subdued” and passive.

Education & Employment: “They grow me”

As Sherry had mentioned earlier in the interview, she had been a Kindergarten teacher for a long time and had always known teaching would be her vocation. Sherry demonstrated her passion not only for teaching but also for learning.

Well, they [additional education classes] grow me. *They grow me*. They give me more language that I can share. Every year they [school administrators] expect us to have professional development um, hours. I’m thinking it’s between 20 to 25 a year and it’s . . . some of its required specific like, confidentiality [and] autism. They make you take a course on religion, which means basically we teach; we may not preach. There are some you know, set-in-stone classes, I have to take,

and then most of the classes I take beyond that have to do with English language development which is the group, the dynamics, the demographics that I serve. They give me something to talk about with my girlfriends who aren't teachers. Sherry's desire to serve her community motivated her to continue education so she can keep helping parents who have concerns about their children.

Many times, people will ask me questions about their own children and I will have just taken a class connected with them. I do see value in it [education]. It stretches my brain. (Sherry chuckled) It gives me language. We have a new reading adoption this next year and I'm going to be taking the training with that even though I specifically won't be teaching reading. But, I want to be . . . I need the common language that the Pre-K teachers are using. I just think the brains a muscle and if you stretch it, it gets stronger and, I like that.

Sherry attributes education to her growth. It has permitted her to connect to others and provide people in need information. Her education fuels her ministry with others.

My advice: "Expect nothing"

Sherry shared what advice that she would give to new widows:

Give yourself time and *expect nothing* from yourself. Take as much time as you need in every [thing] and I know there's supposed to be stages and steps . . . take as much time as you need and find that safe person that will listen to you whenever time of the day or night that will not judge and will just, just be there.

Sherry saw the value of a widow taking her time to heal. While a widow may be expected to heal in “stages and steps,” it does not always work out this way. Some widows need extra time to adjust to widowhood.

Sherry shared her instances of feeling like she was “crazy.

I have went to psychiatrists with my husband’s veteran’s benefits and everything . . . I said, I really just want you to tell me I’m not crazy. She said, “You’re not” and she was able to explain some things that were totally normal and I just . . . that’s what I’d tell every widow.

With the interview completed, Sherry responded with, “Well, I’m a little surprised I didn’t cry. That’s the Holy Spirit.” (Sherry just leaned back and smiled). Sherry believed the Holy Spirit not only was her strength but also helped her with new and difficult situations.

Sherry’s Artifacts

I had asked each of my participants to share something personal (story, poem, picture, etc.) they found comfort with during the time after their husband’s death. Sherry shared scripture from the Bible.

Psalm 23

*1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Sherry used the same Bible that her husband reserved for his services and personal readings. He had words written in the margins, underlined, and circled certain words in red ink. She found comfort and a closeness to him when she read those messages that were important to him.

In addition, she shared a letter from her husband dated 6-19-13 and that she kept in the Bible referenced above along with it as a screen saver on her cell phone. She remarked how she rereads it when she's had a hard day without Tony.

Honey,

I am so thankful that God has put us together. You really are something so very, very special to Him and me.

I am truly grateful for the time He's given me with you. For in this life is a simple tangled mess in the bucket and it's really meant of God to be cherished, used to squeeze every drop of glory and pleasure out of it in His name's sake, out of love and for the good of . . . I am so pleased and honored of God in having you as my wife. You are so thoughtful, smart, loving, kind, and considerate. Not just me, but of others. I like that. I thank you from my ♥.

Anyway, just wanted to let you know my heart & my love for you and am really looking forward to, and the loving of His coming. It gave me a more glorious thing of spending eternity with Him, you and all our family that have gone on before us. More than we can ever hope or think or even ask for.

Forever & Always

Loving you

Tony

This letter seemed to represent the love Sherry and Tony shared. Sherry expressed the comfort Tony's message meant to her. Not only would she share an eternity in God's presence but also with Tony.

Researcher's Reflection

Sherry mentioned that she always had known she wanted to be a teacher since she was little girl. Not only 'playing teacher' as a child, Sherry directed her education to achieve that dream. She has not ever waived from her career and admits to "loving her job." That is hard for me to imagine since I never knew what I wanted to be when I 'grew up' and sometimes wonder even now.

I was surprised to some extent that Sherry was dating someone. Knowing this was a judgment on my part, it was difficult for me to compare myself to her at 16 months of widowhood. It surprised me that her husband's death had not been that long ago and she was ready to move on with her life. That bothered me a little but again, I'm not sure exactly why. I am assuming I remembered what I was like as a widow of 16 months. With depression that took over my life, no one was probably comfortable with being around me. Maybe I was jealous of her healing so quickly and maybe I wished I did not have the memories of those first couple of years of my own journey. After all, it is strictly her business and not mine. I need to remember that people differ in the length of time and the way they heal.

After I spoke with Sherry, I wondered if her intense faith and spirituality in God helped her achieve this healing and again, compared my level of faith to hers. Maybe I was jealous of the emotional peace she exhibited during the interview. I would not define

her behavior as indifference or a lack of sadness to the loss of Tony but I would describe her at being at peace with her loss.

I will have to agree with Sherry's words of "find that safe person that will listen to you whenever time of the day or night that will not judge and will just, just be there." As she mentioned, my adult children (boy and girl), were fabulous in the help and comfort to me during my healing time and remain so to this day. I am especially grateful for the love they have shown me. My 'safe person' who Sherry refers to would be my best friend, Gay. With a listening ear and always being there, I would not have made it through those dark days. She never preached, advised, or ignored my repetitions of stories, ideas, and emotions that I continually experienced. Instead, she listened and she listened and she listened. Just having such a friend and family helped me to begin the healing process.

In the following chapter. I will introduce the next pair of widows, Linda and Beth.

CHAPTER V

LINDA & BETH

Currently at age 64, Linda had been widowed for eight years. Two adult children and multiple grandchildren, Linda is a retired psychologist and college professor. She continues to attend classes for a second master's degree and a certificate in theology. She had been married over 30 years.

Beth's story is of a 58-year-old woman who had been widowed for nine years. She has two adult sons who do not live close to her. As a registered nurse, she has a bachelor's in nursing and a master's in psychology. She also teaches part time at a local university and continues to debate about pursuing a doctorate.

Linda's Journey

He [Bill] had pancreatic cancer. He was diagnosed in March of 2006 and died in September of 2008. He was on a trial drug that for a while was amazing and we really thought it was going to be the answer to our prayers. But then, cancer is very unpredictable and it took a different turn. When he was on this clinical trial

for maybe a year, it was a wonderful year of being together. Then, there was nothing we could do. Bill and I were amazingly close. Now, I look at my married friends and I think, ‘I always thought that Bill and I had something amazingly special.’

Linda cared for her husband at home from the time of his diagnosis with cancer until his death. Her married friends were a constant reminder of the love that she and Bill shared. Linda was a licensed psychologist, college instructor, had been a widow for eight years beginning at age 56. I interviewed her by phone, as she lived out of state.

Pain: “just slowly fade away”

Linda explained how the grief was both challenging and tempting to her sanity. In fact, it was so challenging that she contemplated her own desire to die.

There was a time and I’m going to be completely honest. There was a time that I was sitting at the breakfast table by myself . . . maybe a year after Bill died and I thought . . . you know . . . I wasn’t hungry. I was just sitting there looking at my food and I thought if I just stopped eating, I would *just slowly fade away*, and that would be okay. (Linda cried) So, that’s kind of the level of pain. It’s not even imaginable and whenever people think of widowhood, it [the pain] just isn’t it. At that moment the thought was, “Gee that would be terribly selfish of me because my daughters had just lost their dad. How selfish of me would that be to have them lose their mom as well?” So, that was probably the only thing that kept me from just to stop eating. That would be an easy way to just . . . (Linda paused in conversation) fade into oblivion.

Linda's grief introduced a pain that she had never experienced before. If left to Linda's own preferences, she considered thoughts of dying, "fading away," in order to escape the memories and pain and to ultimately be with Bill. It was so difficult to live without him that it was better not to live at all. Sobering thoughts of what her death would bring to her children tamed these morbid ideas about fading away and set her on the journey of widowhood.

Well-meaning Misconceptions: "That just makes me really angry"

Linda experienced pain while attending church and trying to achieve a "normal" life by interacting with her church friends, oftentimes she found these friends' comments uncomfortable if not upsetting.

I finally told one of my pastoral associates who kinda checked on me throughout the first couple of years and she would say, "oh you're going to want to take those widows we've got in a year [and counsel them on grief and widowhood]. That's just about the right time [to tell them that should be recovered by now] and I thought, "you have no idea." She would say things like the 'new norm' and I would say . . . I finally just told her. I said, "please Nancy, don't say that to me anymore because *that just makes me really angry*. I wasn't . . . I mean, I don't think I was horribly hard to get along with but I was, I was pretty raw for a long time.

Her emotional distress and frustration came from being "guided" or "helped" by those at her church who had never experienced widowhood yet were quick to counsel her. A prescribed "right time" for a widow to be "over" her grief was upsetting, noting that even

in a religious context, society's norms were imposed. She felt pressured by society's expectations and the advice of others, albeit well meaning.

Not only did Linda receive unwanted advice but she was quite often asked by her parish staff to read books about grief that their staff had not yet read in order to provide a helpful recommendation on their usefulness.

She [the pastor] gave me this book. It was 30 days of readings, short readings about grief. She told me, "I want you to read this and tell me what you think." I knew she gave it to me for two reasons. One so she could get a good read on it and also for me. I took it back to her in about 3 to 4 days and her name was Nancy too. I said, "Nancy, I can't read this. It's so already everywhere in my life that when I sit down to read, I don't need this. This is not helping and she said, "this is good to know."

The church staff demonstrated a lack of sensitivity and knowledge on how to interact with someone recently widowed. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned actions rendered a more challenging situation for Linda with her own grief processing. Assigning Linda to read a certain book, especially when she had not requested a book to read or review on grief, reified Linda's position as a widow as something that needed to be tended to, if not corrected or fixed. Her status as a widow did not seem welcome or perhaps made *them* feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, this type of unsolicited advice and materials puts the onus on the widow, in effect compounding Linda's grief. As Linda discovered, the process takes time and a widow needs to heal in her own way.

Anger: "I lost my desire to teach"

As Linda continued in her grief process, she credited work as important to her mental health during the initial grieving process. Linda's practice and teaching career provided support and companionship to her after Bill's death at first, but then Linda began to resent her work.

I was still working [during Bill's illness] but I cut back my hours and everyone at the department knew what was going on. They were very supportive of that.

Work was very redemptive for me so I continued to work and teach at the university for . . . I want to say for about four years after Bill died. If I hadn't of done that . . . (Linda stops talking). Then I just decided, I couldn't teach. There was something about teaching or losing Bill that *I lost my desire to teach* . . . just totally. I'd look at the kids and thought, "I usually love these kids" but I would sit there and go, "you spoiled brats." Young people have no clue and I just thought, "this is not good for them and this is not good for me." So, I retired early. I was 62. A little bit earl[ier] than most people do but it was just time for me to leave and so I did. That was that. That was a *really* difficult time because I had lost two of my major identities [wife and professional]. I wasn't filling it with much of anything. So, my grieving process was really slow. It seems like it should be a linear function but it's not. It's just not.

Linda realized that her behavior with the children was unhealthy and retired early. Her loss of Bill was having a domino effect, affecting her professional life and identity. She recognized that she lost "two major identities" in the grieving process, wife and teacher. She added, "sometimes [you] fall into the pit for a while."

Society's perception: "run as far away as possible"

The "pit" for Linda appeared to represent a dark place where a widow is alone and separated from society. In Linda's opinion, society does not like to talk or think about death; illness and death instill a level of fear within society.

So anyway, I just think that our culture in general, they have a great fear of people dying and being ill and Bill was ill before he died. People grieving makes them . . . they just, they don't know what to do with grieving people. Why does it make people upset when, when you cry? Why? Why? That's a natural response you know. I just think that our society is just very afraid.

Linda questioned the responses she received sometimes when she cried. She experienced people trying to stop her from crying, which made her feel that her tears were not warranted. This reaction only compounded her discomfort.

Tears: "my way of responding"

Linda characterized herself as a "crier," as she cried easily and was known as the "crier" in her family.

I'm a crier. That's kind of a standard joke in the family. Mom is not a crier. My sister's not a crier and they'll say things and just look at me. Bill used to [ask], "are those happy tears, sad tears, or angry tears? Help me understand what kind of tears those are so I can respond." I was like . . . just like sobbing. It just wells up. I mean that was *my way of responding*.

In the many years of marriage to Bill, he never learned the reason for Linda's crying episodes. Linda giggled with endearment when she remembered his confusion by asking what kind of tears they were so he would know how to respond.

Linda pondered the idea of whether there was actually a way to prepare for a spouse's death.

Oh no. I don't think you can. I don't think you want to. Why would you want to dwell on something like that? That's incomprehensible anyway and terribly hard.

I would say [society's view is to] *run as far away as possible*.

Society, it appeared to Linda, "runs away" from situations such as illness and death because it's "incomprehensible and terribly hard" to accept the inevitability of death. As she mentioned, why would we want to contemplate about tragic and incomprehensible situations?

One of my earlier participants for this study had mentioned that she was getting her sparkle back. When I shared that insight with Linda, her comment was, "Oh, yeah, I don't know if I sparkle yet. That might be something [to look forward to]." We both laughed.

External Relationships: "there's all kinds of people out there"

Linda expressed that without her husband to consult or be at her side in decision-making, she had to assert herself more not only as a woman but also as a widow. Linda realized being a widow now meant she needed to be cognizant of costs and repair work that were not her responsibility when Bill was alive.

Oh well, yeah, sure. When you're a single woman, *there's all kinds of people out there* who would like to take advantage. I mean, I always get three estimates on like the roof. I always go to people that I trust [and ask] "who do you take your car to?" There's that piece. This world is too divided as it is.

She missed her husband in areas for which he took the bulk of responsibility, in this case, home repair work. She grew in the process of compensating by networking to fill in her gap of knowledge. Linda demonstrated that widowhood added another level of division between women in society.

Relationships: "no longer part of the group"

Linda referred to herself as an introvert and how that, coupled with widowhood, made it challenging to meet new people and socialize, especially when relating to other couple friends. She felt awkward now as a single woman.

But, but . . . I mean after Bill died, I was not . . . I don't want to use the term "neglected" but my friends who were all couples . . . that was hard because they were no longer . . . (Linda paused) I was *no longer part of the group* and you know, at some level I understood that and so I mean I still have friends. The women that I'm close to I . . . I'm really, really careful when I'm with them as a couple that I, I honor their marriage because otherwise it might get troublesome and you know what? As a wife, I can understand that. It's not anything that I probably wouldn't do myself. I mean I understand that to the point where I'm not angry. It is what it is and it would be foolish for me to fly in the face of that

understanding. I mean, I'm still an introvert and don't need that many friends - one or two.

Linda recognized when trying to interact with her old couple friends that they treated her different now. She was "no longer a part of the group." At times, some of the women perceived her as a threat. Linda felt the need to take new measures to allay the fears that the women may have had. This sense of "not belonging" where she once did signified another possible loss and change of identity.

God's Love: "it was mine and it was private"

Recognizing the slippery slope in trying to socialize with couple friends, Linda often retreated to her relationship to God and her family for comfort and support. She noted that her relationship with God grew so stronger. While Linda had always been a woman of faith, after Bill's death, she found solace and comfort in developing her faith even further.

. . . the whole idea of having this relationship with God was that *it was mine and it was private* and wasn't anybody else's business. The part of life that is others, outside [of] me. I think as an introvert, I had no need for others much. So, that has challenged me. Then I realized that it's community so God was in me and God was in others. That's the only way that this works.

For Linda, her faith in God provided a major support in the grief process. she could be or become the person she was. It "wasn't anybody else's business" allowed her to separate herself from the influences of social norms and become her own person through the strength and guidance of her faith.

God: “the only relationship that really suffered”

While Linda appeared to be of deep faith, she admitted a separation from God after Bill’s death. During Linda’s early grief, she distanced herself from God and in fact, she confessed to being angry with Him for taking Bill away.

I think my relationship; the only *relationship that really suffered* during this time was my relationship with God because I was just angry with Him. For a long time I didn’t even express it. I’d start to read a psalm or something and say “yes,” I’m answering my prayers and I just kept my Bible at the end of my bed and [this] was the same today and yesterday and tomorrow. When is this going to happen? This separation brought chaos and guilt into her life but also interfered with her ability to find peace and healing. Linda placed the Bible at the end of her bed, perhaps in a symbolic gesture for her needed consistency and strength as she said that it was “the same today and yesterday and tomorrow.” The Bible, while in close physical proximity to Linda, also at times seemed to remain distant.

Relationship with Mom: “never really close”

Linda not only experienced guilt about her Bible reading but also about the relationship with her mother. Their relationship had always been strained and, therefore, presented challenges for Linda. After Linda’s father’s and Bill’s death, Linda’s relationship with her mom started to improve. She noted her mother’s care for her well-being.

I’m a daughter. Much more a daughter now than I used to be since my dad has died. He died three years ago and mom and I were *never really close*. I have an

older sister who was really close to my mom but since dad died, I think it's easier for mom so we can do things together. My sister still is married and her husband's doing well. They do things together and it's just one of those things again. To be honest I don't know that my mom would choose to do things with me but I'm (Linda cries) the available one. So, we do things together and that's been fun. That's helped our relationship a great deal. My mom would call me and she'd say, "how are you doing" and I'd say, "fine." [Mom would respond] "I can tell from your voice that you're not fine" and then I'd tell her how I was. She finally said, "I just wish I could call one time and you would be happy." Like well mom, I'm sorry. You know, I mean . . . like right now I don't even know what "happy" means. When you love someone, you just want them to be better and I know that's what my Mom had in mind. She just wanted to make me better. It was as though . . . it wasn't insulting because I know my mom better than that. It was not what she meant to do. She wanted to shorten whatever process I needed to go through and it just wasn't going to be shortened.

Linda spoke with hesitation when mentioning her mom and felt that her mom favored her sister, but Bill's death and her father's death gave her and her mother a common experience that was allowing them to grow closer.

Children: "I had to be doubly careful"

Linda's two grown daughters and grandchildren were her lifeline when she considered "fading away" after Bill's death. However, Linda also recognized that they had to heal from the loss of their dad and granddad just as she had to heal from the loss of

a husband. While a difficult task for all of them, Linda was careful to not share all of her emotions with her family, not wanting to make the healing process more difficult for them than it already was.

I love my daughters and grandkids; and I loved Bill. We were a very small, tight knit, honed unit. I could talk to the girls about it, my daughters, but *I had to be doubly careful* that I wasn't making the process for them more painful than what they were already going through.

As Linda shared this information, she was quite candid in her need to protect her family from additional grief so she kept many emotions and thoughts to herself.

Secular & Spiritual Education: "I just kinda came back to life"

Linda's earlier degrees had all been in psychology. While she appeared to benefit from this knowledge, she admitted to the difficulty to rationalize her own life. She selected her second master's degree in theology but she discovered an oblate program at her monastery that she undertook in conjunction with her master's degree in theology.

I had started that process even before when Bill was diagnosed and then it took me a little longer to get through it. I started to take classes because again, I needed . . . I needed structure. I didn't have any structure at that point [be]cause I was just a wash. I could describe it as laying out in the middle of this deep, dark ocean. So, the classes gave me . . . it stimulated me intellectually. It stimulated me spiritually and then another sort of miraculous sort of thing [happened. I] was able to become a part of a Spiritual Direction Certificate Program. I had started taking classes. I'm an oblate at St. Myra. The monastery is actually a benediction

monastery and the benedicts allow lay people to be a part of who they are and they are called oblates, such as Oblation like offering. You become oblates to a particular benedict community. I had done that and had started that process even before when Bill was diagnosed and . . . and then it took me a little bit longer to kinda get through it. We were part of the first [cohort].

Linda's explained the certificate program would enable her psychology skills along with theology skills to increase her ability to help others. She saw a connection between psychological and theology counseling that would work toward the same goal of helping others both spiritually and secularly.

It [is] to prepare you to become a spiritual director, which is someone, who walks alongside others, helps develop their prayer life, and their deeper walk with God. So, that's kind of what a spiritual director is. Anyway, so that was a three-year process. I'm still working on it at St. Myra. It [master's degree] would be in theology . . . It *will* be in theology. Hopefully, I mean well, we'll see. It may not be . . . this is very timely for me right now so this is a good place for me to be.

For Linda, while psychology and faith may be two separate educational fields, both provided insight for grieving, healing, and finding peace. Although Linda was pleased to find this type of education mentally stimulating and spiritually satisfying, her mother questioned her actions.

My mother who's 92, bless her heart, would say, "well now, what are you going to do with this [oblate classes] when you get done?" Only God knows that mama. I don't, literally I do not. I just know that this is part of my healing process and this has been a huge . . . again, it's very redemptive for me.

Her religious education gave importance to her life and was part of critical part of her healing process. It gave her life structure and meaning.

It gave me, it gave my life structure. It made me get up in the morning. It made me, you know, it made me think. It made me do things. The oblate program was very redemptive and then the master's courses became very redemptive and of course, the spiritual direction courses . . . those are the kind of things along with, you know, personal prayer, scripture, and sacrament. Those became my anchors. They were probably my anchors before, but they were anchored in a different way. So, the spiritual direction program was really transformational. The Spiritual Direction Certificate has allowed me to go to my pastor and say, "how can I help in the church?" I'm on a different level now and that doesn't even begin to describe . . . *I just kinda came back to life*. People would say I just seemed more full of life now or you seem more fulfilled. I just have to say it's been eight years and thank God, you know, or because otherwise I wouldn't be here, truly. I . . . I don't just say that most of the time but since this is research, I just want to be as honest and truthful and as full as what you need. So that's kinda the story. I can truly say that. It's just one of those things where right now God has me in a place and I'm real comfortable with it.

Linda viewed the oblate classes as "redemptive" and "really transformational." The result brought her "back to life" and back into the world of the living.

Linda talked about not seeing the oblate program leading to a career per se, rather it was part of a "sacred journey" and a vocation that would prepare her better for working with others.

Yeah, I would say that now the academic courses are more amazing because at the monastery, I mean they stress it's an active course but it has a spiritual . . . it always has a Catholic/spiritual /religious side to it. I think that whatever God calls me to do, these courses that I am taking are going to equip me better.

Linda found a way to combine her secular classes with her spiritual ones in a way that provided guidance and stability in her life, giving her future direction and providing understanding and relief from the past. Linda plans to one day have a master's and certificate in theology. "I'll just plug along and if I can keep taking one class per quarter . . . God willing, I'll be finished, you know, maybe by the time I'm 70. Maybe not." She talked about her education goals with determination and a future orientation, an attitude that was not present when talking about Bill's death and her attempts to socialize with others.

The monastery: "They didn't try to make it better"

Linda was very attracted to the monastery, as she noted, "maybe inordinately." It was quiet and peaceful. She enjoyed the solitude and the opportunity to heal privately.

I think that's why I got so attached to, maybe inordinately attached, to the monastery because *I could be whomever* and they just sat there and prayed for me. They didn't, they didn't try to make it better . . . Thankfully, our relationship is faithfulness, and I think I turned the corner on that hopefully. I don't know how it happened, Nancy. I don't see myself as very faithful a lot of the time because I know my heart and I know my thoughts. I know how I feel a lot of times but I just I really don't know, I honestly don't know how people do this without . . . I never

. . . I don't want to lose anybody else for sure but I just don't know how people do it without faith in God. I couldn't. I wouldn't have. I don't even know.

Linda's comment "I could be whoever" seemed to explain her need to become her own person in her own time while ignoring society's expectations and attempts to "fix" her. In her journey "to turn the corner" on her grief, it was obvious that to do so was something so challenging that she could not even detail or summarize it, "I just I really don't know."

Linda did not believe it was her place to give advice for others, as she seemed to see it as such a personal unique journey for each person. She did offer, however, a passage from St. Theresa that focused on the love of God.

She [St. Teresa] talks to her nuns that are in her order as her daughters with, "daughters, I just wish we would all think less and love more." Then she asked, "how is it that we know we're loving God? That's a hard thing to know but if we're loving people, then we know we're loving God." I thought wow. That's me. That was just really good for me because sometimes I just think . . . I'm thinking I'm just not doing very well. She [Saint Theresa] calls it "determination." That's kinda what it's been.

Becoming a widow seemed to require Linda to have even more faith in God's love. To "think less and love more" offered Linda consolation in her grieving process and how to proceed with it. Her continued work and classes at the monastery provided a pillar of educational and spiritual support in her life.

Education: “it opens doors”

Although Linda identified with the monastery, she viewed education as playing an important role in widows’ adjustment to a different life. For Linda, education initially provided a career as a psychologist and a teaching profession while she was married. She talked about the difference education can make in one’s life.

Well generally, it [education] can . . . I think it can be generally edifying and uplifting to the human spirit because *it opens doors* that would . . . continue to stay shut. . . . I think it shows and gives you a taste for different perspectives. It certainly helps you to have a more universal perspective on human kind. . . So, I was a huge public school proponent and then my daughters both attended Notre Dame. I realized the added dimension that having education through the service of God and humans was even better but I’m a great believer in education. My husband came from a very impoverished background. His dad was an alcoholic, he was abusive, and he abandoned them. Education was a way for him to get out of that world. An education that provides enrichment for the spirit as well can only be that much better. For me it’s not to look beyond but at a different point and that if I’m going to be a proponent of education, then I need to say, “it needs to feed the soul and spirit as well.”

Linda expressed the advantages that education brought to her family. Although a public school proponent, she witnessed the difference a religious education made in her daughter when she attended Notre Dame. She concluded that the combination of secular and spiritual education was the best type of education, “it needs to feed the soul and spirit as well.”

Linda believes that formal education may not be the panacea for all widows. She thinks that the person needs to be interested in further formal education and, of course, it has to be feasible both financially and with her other responsibilities.

Unless widows just decide to go back to school on their own, I don't think education . . . I don't think it pulls them in. I don't think there's any organized effort to bring widows into the educational system. You know at any level, volunteer, or participating in classes or whatever and I don't think that's . . . and I'm not sure that a whole lot of widows out there that would be an answer for them.

Linda asserted that some widows may not even think about formal education as an alternative to develop a new life or increase their self-esteem due to their life situations.

My future: "It's not . . . [what] I would have chosen"

While Linda looked forward to new experiences, she continued to grieve for the future she and Bill did not have. She considered selling the house because it had become too much for her to maintain on her own. She compared her life now and her life as if Bill were alive.

To be honest and not too long ago, I was sitting there thinking life would have been a whole lot more fun if Bill had been still here but he's not. *It's not the one (life) I would have chosen.* I haven't even gotten to the point [of] saying that life goes on but that's just . . . I can't say that, you know. But, there have been things that have grown out of this where I could see the hand of God and if I couldn't, then I might as well be dead.

It appeared Linda healed enough in her grief to realize that God had a hand in everything and this included Bill's death, which she had grown from. From a widow that thought about starving herself to death to a widow that saw hope in her future, Linda appeared to have come a long way in her widowhood journey.

Identity: "I have a lot of identities"

Linda struggled in coming to terms with the label of "widow."

I don't often use that word [widow]. I mean, I am by all demographics. I am but it doesn't . . . I don't define myself by that way and I never, I've never tried to. In education it's all about this and blah, blah, blah and, you know, I like to just define myself as a human, as a Christian, and as a Catholic. *I have a lot of identities*. I'll always be a mom, I'll always be grandma . . . I have five grandchildren. I'm a daughter. Much more a daughter now than I used to be since my dad has died. I am right now a beloved child of God. That's who I am.

Linda recognized how society tended to essentialize her identity with primarily the label of "widow." These type of labels, she asserts, do not encompass her multiple identities.

However, it seemed difficult for Linda to identify herself as a complete person without Bill. She relied on the support and love he always showed her. Without this reminder, she regressed into self-doubt and appeared to question her abilities as a professional.

I have to be honest. Even though I'm a psychologist by training, I have a hard time seeing how other people see me. That's just very difficult. I just don't have that. I was giving a talk to a group [about] if a parishioner is having a difficult

time going through a divorce, loss, or something. There are people who have been trained [attending]. I don't know what the training is – two years anyway where they are there to listen. One of the guys came up to me goes, “so break a leg” and I said, “please pray this all comes off the [right] way.” He said, “I can't believe you're saying that. You're the most confident woman I have ever met.” I thought (Linda laughed), “oh, that blinds me. I need to know myself better.”

Linda continues to struggle with embracing what others see as her strengths, especially without Bill's support.

Advice: “I wouldn't give advice”

Linda stopped talking when asked about advice to other widows as if to give this question considerable thought before she responded to the advice she had received after Bill died. It appeared that Linda questioned her abilities to provide advice but instead suggested being there to help mow the yard, buy groceries, or invite the new widow to do things.

I mean people gave me all kinds of advice. It was horrible for the most part. In fact, I don't remember any good advice I got and maybe that's because I was in a depressed state and I filtered everything good out. Not one, not one piece of advice that I can remember struck true for me. So I, *I wouldn't give advice*. I just wouldn't but . . .

Linda appeared to have received a lot of well-intended advice but “not one, not one piece of advice that I can remember struck true for me.. In fact, she credits much of this advice increased her depression.

“Being there” without judgment, to Linda, was the first step in helping a widow.

I don’t think I would want to give advice. I think I would ‘be there’. I would try to be there. If they asked for what my experience is, I might give it but being there and understanding. You know, they may not be able to ask for help but they certainly need companionship and support especially from people in the church. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to ask occasionally if they needed someone to mow their yard and maybe if they needed help with some little chores around the house.

There’s just so many things. I would try to be there maybe for their spiritual needs [and] possibly some of their practical household needs. Why don’t I come over and help clean house or how about I make dinner for you? *Long* after their husband is gone. You know how it is. You’re just tired of making dinner. They may not have anyone to feed it to. You know, why bother? Yeah, yeah, I know it’s tough. So anyway, I just wouldn’t give anybody any advice.

Linda understands that companionship, household help, or just going out to eat provided a widow with “someone being” there. She believed this type of support went further to help widows than advice ever could.

Linda’s Artifacts

Linda shared her personal artifacts that she “hung on to a lot.” They were significant in her widow journey. Linda’s first prayer was hand-written and she responded with, “These prayers are ones I have said after [Bill died].”

My consolation has (and always will) come from my faith in God. My healing has come from Scripture, Sacraments, prayers, and loved ones. I will not be completely healed in this lifetime, but I am consoled that my beloved and I will find each in Paradise.

Linda mentioned she prayed this every day in remembrance of Bill and their eternal life together.

Prayer of Saint Teresa of Avila

May today there be peace within.

May I trust God that I am exactly where I am meant to be.

May I not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May I use those gifts that I have received, and pass on the love that has been given to me.

May I be content knowing I am God's beloved child.

Let this presence settle into my bones, and allow my soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise, and love.

It is there for each and every one of us.

Linda seemed to view this prayer as trust that God had placed her where He needed her. Though she may not always agree, she claimed the contentment and peace He offered to her.

The Power of Prayer: an encouragement of Saint John Chrysostom

The potency of prayer hath subdued the strength of fire;

It hath bridled the rage of lions,

Hushed anarchy to rest,

Extinguished wars,

Appeased the elements,

Expelled demons,

Burst the chains of death,

Expanded the gates of heaven,

Assuage diseases,

Repelled frauds,

Rescued cities from destruction,

Stayed the sun in its course,

And arrested the progress of the thunderbolt.

And lastly, Linda shared the following.

Be At Peace: by Saint Francis de Sales

*Do not look forward in fear to the changes of life;
Rather, look to them with full hope that as they arise, God,
Whose very own your are, will lead you safely through all things;
And when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in His arms.*

*Do not fear what my happen tomorrow; the same everlasting
Father who cares for you today will take care of you today and every day.*

He will either shield you from suffering or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.

Be at peace and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

These last two writings explained the power of prayer to combat fear and for Linda, they also seemed to represent the trust in God that she needed to withstand the grief of losing Bill.

Researcher's Reflection

When Linda shared her own feelings of depression, I remembered the intensity of my own. I do remember walking around in a complete daze and one specific time in particular, I rounded a curve much too fast and I thought, "oh, I should have slowed way down for this but oh well - whatever happens -happens." Depression is an ugly thing and one that I knew nothing about until I became a widow. I understood as much as possible the level of pain Linda referred to in her own story. Each widow has her own unique set of circumstances and grief she must endure to heal.

I used education also as structure in my life. As Linda mentioned, education provided a necessity to study and write papers that in turn, gave me something to do that needed to be done. Not only that, but it gave me other things to think about instead of

dwelling on my grief. I began this doctoral program about two years after Ron died. I wanted to begin it earlier but as I have mentioned, depression can be quite awful and sucks the life out of you. As far as myself, education has been a blessing for me in this adjustment to widowhood. Interesting to note, Linda agreed that education may/may not be for all widows. However, her remark that education does not 'pull' widows into academia is interesting. Widows may possibly be a segment of the population that academia needs to pay more attention to not only for their student numbers but for the help education could provide to widows' mental and emotional health.

As far as advice goes, my thoughts are that individuals who experience the loss of a spouse are more equipped to share advice with other widows than the general population. For example, I had one well-meaning friend who argued with me in moving to another house closer to my children. He suggested, "just paint the inside, get new furniture, and rearrange it [furniture] and that will be good enough. You don't need to move." However, when I walked outside, everything would be the same. Besides, one cannot change 'everything' inside the house. Memories for me only added to the weight of depression I was already experiencing. While keeping everything the same in a widow's life as that life was during her marriage may work for some widows as far as comfort and security in familiar surroundings, it did not work for me.

Beth's Journey

It was just very sad, very fast. I always thought that if you knew death was coming, it would be easier than if it were all of a sudden. It's really not. It really is not any easier because you've got this *thing* hanging over your head. Joe died on June 30th, at 3:23 in the morning. He was diagnosed Easter of '07 and they said they could give us . . . they *thought* they could give us two years, and . . . we were in total shock. We had less than three months. He flunked. He had a very aggressive cancer. They never really biopsied it. They called it an androcarcenoma. It's very aggressive. He was not a smoker. It started in his lungs, at least that's where they discovered it. He had back pain for months and months and wouldn't go to the doctor. Finally went to the doctor 'cause he was coughing by that time and [the] doctor thought he had pneumonia and put him on an antibiotic. Joe went back a week later on his own and that's when he was hospitalized. We had Easter, Father's Day, Mother's Day, [our son's] birthday, our 25th wedding anniversary, and then he died.

Beth was difficult to reach by phone, text, and email to schedule this interview. She later admitted she feared any form of communication unless she knew the caller. When she did return my phone calls, we made plans to meet at a local restaurant after she got off work. So that I would recognize her, she described herself on the phone with brown curly hair, no glasses, and overweight. I knew that Beth was a registered nurse and halfway expected her to walk into the restaurant in scrubs. Instead, she bounced

enthusiastically through the door in black slacks and a white blouse. Beth at 58 years of age had now been a widow for nine years.

We selected a booth as far away from people as possible but due to the time of day it was, our privacy did not last long. It was now dinnertime and the restaurant was getting increasingly busy. Unfortunately, a couple with a loud crying child sat behind us making it difficult to carry on this interview. Now that I think back on the situation, maybe the noise was a comfort for Beth since she had a very difficult time with this interview. As I attempted to console her and let her know that I understood, she remarked, "I'm all of a sudden, I'm going to cry. I'm sorry. I'm beyond this . . . I don't know why [I'm crying]." Beth continued to cry as I searched my purse for Kleenex. She continued to cry a lot during our conversation and apologized frequently for her display of emotions.

Society: "We're not a couple anymore"

As Beth cried, she explained her conception of what a couple in society meant to her.

Well, you will relate to this. A couple? *We're not a couple anymore*. So, the couple friends are not really couple friends anymore. It's just too uncomfortable [for them]. I'm now "me" instead of "us." That's a big change. I don't think of myself as half of a couple any longer.

A couple, for Beth, meant two people and now that Joe was gone, she was 'one'. As a new widow, she had defined herself as "half of a couple," but that too had changed. Beth

noticed that her church friends were uncomfortable around her. Beth's pastors and church acquaintances did not offer comfort to Beth after Joe's death that hurt her feelings.

Beth felt like society expected widows to recover from grief quickly. People seemed not to know what to do with sadness and crying. Put on a happy face because people do not want to see a sad face. You can come home and cry but when you're out, you have to maintain yourself. Appearances meant a great deal to Beth in how others regarded her. She considered it taboo to allow others to see a widow cry because society expected otherwise.

Church community: "I stood there and just cried"

One of Beth's new experiences consisted of music at her church. Beth's social involvement had always revolved around her church and music worship team but now she considered it a lifeline.

I had been on the team several years and you'd think I would have developed some relationships but I did not. I had one friend there. It may have been my fault. It may have been just circumstances. So, when he [Joe] died within a couple of months, we were told that our worship team was disbanding and essentially that we were too old. I don't say that to many people but I'm just going to tell you the depth of the grief. That was a big thing. *I stood there and just cried.* (Beth cried). That was where I went once a week. Plus, I had church in the morning but we had practice Tuesday night. I knew I had to be there and I knew I had to pull myself together. This was really important to me and it . . . it was a drastic change. I was very, very angry and I stopped going to church.

Beth found peace and joy in singing and even though the church staff offered her other options to stay involved, like childcare, this was not helpful and she felt very distraught without having this major element in her life. The church had traditionally been a place of comfort and solace for Beth and she had turned to this community after Joe's death and felt somewhat betrayed by the worship team being cut.

There were other negative experiences at her church that were more personal. Beth continued to feel her church's lack of support and understanding for widows and resented their insensitivity and depersonalization.

They [my past church] sent me an email. It must have been within a month or two after Joe's death and they invited me to this single's thing. Oh my gosh, and it may have only been in that first month. I sent them a scathing email back and there was no holding back. She [church secretary] called me and said, "I am so sorry. All we get is a database of people who are not married and we send everything out. I didn't know. I'll certainly take your name off the list." Because my thought was, I am *not* single. That's my change. That's my change in the last two years and it's only been this year that I took my ring off and the only reason I took it off was because I lost enough weight to lose it. I was wearing Joe's ring. Not mine. Widows aren't single - single - forever - single as never been married single and you're not divorced - single.

Beth resented receiving an invitation to the singles group so soon after her husband's death. Once more, she resented someone else deciding where she belonged or what her identity should be and when that change was to occur.

Fears: “I really do not want these people knowing that I live alone.”

Beth explained why hesitated to contact me for this interview.

Let’s say I have a workman come to the house to service the air conditioner. I tell him, “oh *my husband’s out of town.*” I do not, I really *do not* want these people knowing that I live alone. I don’t really know if they (strangers) are telling me the truth. I’ve had to sell things and I don’t. I give them away because I do not want people coming to my house and knowing I live there alone. I will walk into the house and say, “Hi Joe.” I still do that because if there is somebody behind me, I want them to hear there is somebody in the house waiting on me. “Hey honey, I’m home” . . . and then I’ll close the garage door. It’s stupid.

I assured Beth this was not stupid if it made her feel better. She replied, “It makes me feel better.” She obviously felt vulnerable as a woman alone at home and took measures that she felt would ensure greater safety and make her feel protected.

If someone calls me on the phone like a mechanic or something, [I’ll say] let me talk to my husband and I’ll get back with you and really, if I’m going to talk to anybody, it’s going to be my son.

She added, “I don’t need anybody but me. That’s what I’m learning. I’m sorry.” (Beth continued to cry). “I can’t believe I’m doing this. It’s always just right there [sadness and crying]. Do you feel that way?”

I sympathized with Beth and understood as a fellow widow. Beth added, “There’s another component. Somebody wants me. If I’m married, somebody wants me. I’m important to somebody.” (Beth cried) Beth had a need to belong with someone to feel valued. It was just another reason why she would still make references to her husband as

if he were alive, saying “Hi Joe!” when she walked into the house or referring to the need to discuss something with him with a repairperson.

Relationships: “I was alone”

Her husband’s death, of course, affected her sons. They were both living out of state during their father’s illness.

I’ve got two boys. Ian did not tell his bosses that his father was dying. I waited until the very end and I probably should have called Ian sooner to come home [he had just started a new job] but I didn’t. He seemed so detached and he’s still kinda detached. Aaron was [at college in-state]. Aaron came home for Joe’s chemotherapy. I didn’t ask him to. I didn’t want him to. He just dropped classes. Aaron flunked that semester. [The university] did not take care of him. I am so angry with [the university]. They were both away and *I was alone* in the house. They were dealing with their own grief. They knew how sad I was and it was probably very hard to be around me.

Beth did not want to burden either son after Joe died. The oldest son, Ian, seemed emotionally detached from his mother. Alone, she endured her grief apart from them. Beth appeared to distance herself from her sons intentionally, as she recognized they needed their own time to heal. Beth remarked, “family . . . there was no family here.” Beth’s sons did not visit very often and with family members far away, there was no option than to live alone.

Beth turned to her friends at work for support during Joe’s illness and after his death.

They were my work buddies. Joe loved to cook and Joe loved to have people over so he could cook for them. When he got sick, these women friends came over more and we called them Joe's harem. We all thought that was funny and Theresa was head of the harem. I think that if Joe hadn't of met me first but he would have met Theresa, he would have wanted to marry Theresa. She gets along so well with his family. Way better than I do. She just fits right in. She's just, she just lovely. They were both extremely supportive. Yeah, good to talk to. Will do anything for me. Family . . . there was no family here. Beth realized how fortunate she was to have such good friends. Nine years later, these women continued to remain supportive to Beth.

Beth considered living with her mother but quickly dismissed that idea. Living in my mother's basement? I mean, I would have committed suicide if I had of gone home and lived with my mother. No, I do not mean that really . . . I don't. I'm going there to visit and a week is enough. (We both laughed)

Beth mentioned Joe's family, his background, and her estranged relationship with them. After Joe's death, Beth's ties with his family became even more distant. She wondered if the problem was due to the cultural differences or the possibility, they never accepted their son's marriage.

Joe was an immigrant. He was born in East Africa. They're Portuguese but the Portuguese [and] the Indian comingled so who knows what ethnicity he was. The family is from Goa. It's a peninsula off of India. He [Joe] was planning a trip for us in January, before . . . it would have been after he died. (Beth cried) People were told whom they were going to marry. They were going to marry Joe's little sister to a native . . . you know, just a native person. Joe escaped at 19. He tried to

leave at 17 and he got caught. He had little whip marks on his back. He didn't really want to talk about any of this but I mean, he had trauma. So at 19, his father, a ship captain, put him in a closet on board the ship. He couldn't stand. He couldn't sit. All he could do was kinda hunch over and he stayed there from early morning until they reached the mainland late at night. He stayed in that closet. After Joe immigrated into the United States, he and Beth met each other and married. Joe's family was important to him but Beth continued to question if they ever accepted her into the family fold. This disassociation continued after Joe died.

Education: "I totally closed down"

Not having her family or Joe's family for support caused Beth to experience grief alone.

She did not wish to rely too much on her friends and therefore, internalized many emotions and sought out a way to engage her mind on something else.

After Joe died, within two years [I returned to school]. The reason I did is . . . I closed down. *I totally closed down*. The reason I did is I was going to die myself and that would have been okay too but you know, you feel some responsibility to the kids. Yes, they're grown and they don't need you like they did but that's not right to just let go and say, "I'm just going to die." That's just not right. So, I had to do something and a degree was what I wanted. I've always been a good student so . . . I wanted the BSN, the Bachelors of Science and Nursing so what's been stopping me all these years . . . not just Joe's travel in moving us from state to state. You know, these were times where there really were no online classes

available. If you started in a college, you needed to stay there until you finished and I didn't feel like I could do that because we were moving every few years. Beth had "closed down" mentally, physically, and emotionally after Joe died. Without a desire to live and the depression that took over her life, she turned inward and away from others. She had been determined to finish her education but the timing never seemed right. In order to save herself from despair, Beth decided it was now time to return to school and do something for herself.

Beth explained that although she had a diploma in nursing, that her ultimate goal was to obtain a bachelor's degree in nursing. She challenged herself but struggled with participating fully in class.

Anyways, so I started back to school in '09. I really withdrew. I didn't realize how much I withdrew until this . . . one professor and . . . he kept answering all of my questions and that's like feeding a mouse. You give a mouse a cookie and [he'll] ask for a glass of milk. I didn't realize how hungry I was. I felt like I came alive and I made a comment to my friends about that I didn't realize how withdrawn I had been. They looked at me and said . . . [I had]. Nobody told me. It [education] saved my life. How about that? It gave me something to focus on. I had nothing to focus on. I just existed and I'm such a goal-oriented person. It saved my life and it gave me something to do that I was interested in and it was a goal I already had. I just . . . the time just wasn't right to work on that goal [earlier]. (Beth cried)

Beth viewed education as saving her life. As her depression continued to develop, Beth envisioned little joy for the future. However, a degree in nursing was a goal she always

had so when the time was right, Beth returned to school to fulfill that dream. Depression took a back seat as education provided her with responsibilities and commitments to complete daily. As Beth mentioned, “it gave me something to focus on” other than grief and isolation that took over her life after Joe died.

Having a professor take note of her and encourage her brought Beth back into being more engaged in class. She realized how much she had to give to an interest that she had had even before Joe’s death. Finally, Beth was able to take advantage of the education opportunity before her and grow in multiple ways.

Beth shared her future ideas for education but realized that financially, it was not possible unless she made radical changes in her lifestyle.

If money wasn’t the issue, I would have gotten a doctorate. Absolutely! Yeah, it would open more doors for me and I like school and like I said before, I like to learn. I wouldn’t mind learning a new profession except I’m 58 years old and I don’t have the money to spend on school. I would have to move home and live with mom in Michigan. If someone said to me, we need nursing instructors and we will pay for your education if you’re willing to go. I would be hot on that. It [education] gave me something to do that I wanted to do and once I start I’m not going to quit.

With a bachelor’s in nursing and a master’s in psychology, Beth worked as an RN with psychiatric patients. Recently, Beth began teaching online nursing classes for a local university. Still, Beth hopeful for even more opportunities. As a result, she updated her computer skills for teaching online. She was dissatisfied with her current employer so she remained open to the possibility of pursuing a doctorate.

I had to take two classes to teach online. So, that was done last year and this is my third online class that I've got going right now. I could switch back to [working as a] psych [nurse] without much [problem]. It depends how angry I get with my current job. (Beth winked and laughed) So I don't know. It comes in waves.

Beth was confident she could work as a nurse in hospice or psychology as she was qualified in both areas. Beth continued to work, teach, and take classes necessary to update her nursing and teaching skills but also to fill her days. The "waves" appeared to represent the 'ups and downs' Beth had experienced as a widow.

Temptations: "food provided comfort"

For Beth, *food provided comfort* and refuge from grief. Beth grimaced and replied:

Eating. I gained half of what I'd lost. I actually have hope and this is one reason why I'm perking up. I have hope that I might get to a normal weight. I have never . . . after my bypass, believed I could get to a normal weight but when I got to a certain weight and got stuck there . . . I gave up. I was hopeless again and I've been hopeless all of this time. I've been hopeless until this year. We don't change our habits. We don't. We've lowered our metabolism. [Food] that's what I get lost in.

Beth struggled with her weight most of her life, but Joe's death was an additional challenge to staying healthy. Like her struggle to be disciplined in her learning and obtaining another degree, Beth also learned to discipline her eating habits.

Identity: “being me”

With all of these experiences of being alone and struggling with new situations, such as being a student and handling household issues or figuring out friendships now that Beth was no longer part of a couple, she began to “come into her own” sense of self.

I’ve had thoughts that if Joe came home right now after nine years of not knowing me, he wouldn’t know me now. I mean, he would know the basic person I am, but I’ve had so many more experiences than he and I had together. I’m a different persona and he would be the same. He wouldn’t [have] grown. So, I wonder if I met Joe now, if he came home, would he like me or would I even like him. Would living together again . . . be a problem? Those are new thoughts. I’ve never had thoughts like those before. So, that’s the journey of becoming me.

Beth believed her widow’s experiences had transformed her into a different person compared to the wife she was nine years ago. She wondered if Joe “would even like me” now. Due to new experiences, Beth viewed herself as transformed into the woman today.

Feeling happier and more like her old self was a new experience for Beth. She referred to it as a “sparkle.”

I had been just going through the motions. I was a very outgoing (Beth cried) person - lots of fun, lots of laughter, and party. Not party I’m going to out and drink but let’s have people over, you know, social. That all changed. So, in the last couple of years, I feel like myself again and it’s been and I don’t know how long now it’s been. I try not to think of how long it’s been. I’m at nine years this month. Nine years. (Beth sighed deeply and looked down at the table)

Beth experienced many emotions since Joe's death. It seemed easier for her to ignore the number of years as a widow but now, new situations provided hope and happiness.

Beth had to work for financial reasons but she also realized that the routine helped her work through her grief and give her a sense of purpose. She explained, "I had to work. Financially I had to work. I'm very competitive."

Beth shared her growing enthusiasm for life.

I'm alive now. Do you see a sparkle? *I have a sparkle*. I'm looking forward more than back . . . I want to do stuff. I want to meet people and see people and . . . do things. That is just such a change. That I would even consider dating. I only in the last year considered that if . . . if a man came up to me and said, "would you go out with me?" Well, would I even do that? Well, maybe I would. I would be awfully uncomfortable and I don't know if I would really like to invite anybody into my life but that would be . . . I might be open to that. That's new. So, I'm growing. I'm starting to think of myself as "me" rather than "us."

Once again, Beth credited education as a contributor to the positive changes in her life. She was more open to meeting new people and going out. She was discovering who she was without Joe.

Advice: "It's going to be a long haul"

Beth's experiences as a widow had changed her perception about giving and receiving advice. Beth rolled her eyes and shook her head before speaking.

. . . philosophically, I do not believe that I could just give up, turn over, and die.

Although if I had . . . like I said, that would have been okay. If I had a cancer

diagnosis now, I don't know that I would really want to fight it, but you gotta realize that I'm in hospice and I see the worst of cancer and I see what therapies do to people also. You have to give up something when you're doing all of this [the grief process] and now I've added all this exercise in[to] the mix.

While Beth fought the grief and depression, admitting that it would have been so much easier to give up. Perhaps the fact that she works with people who have fatal illnesses made a difference in her own struggle.

After a few seconds, Beth added another piece of advice for new widows.

Okay, *it's going to be a long haul*. Keep busy. Find distractions. If someone asks you to go do something, go do it. Even if you don't feel like it, go do it. Find a goal. Develop a new interest. Go take some music lessons . . . if you want to learn how to play the guitar, go do it. If you want to plant a garden, now's the time. Go meet your neighbors. Try to get out of the house as much as you can.

The advice that Beth thought most pertinent for new widows was simply "go do it" even if you do not want to. Discover a goal or complete a long time dream to fill the time and force growth, whether you want to or not. It was as if at some point the desire would coincide with the motions.

While Beth advised against widows crying, she did admit support groups might help with grief. Beth had not gone to a support/bereavement group after Joe died and she warned widows about getting involved with them too early into widowhood.

A support group is really up to that individual. There was bereavement and I was invited to the bereavement group. I did not go and [an acquaintance] told me about a group in my church and I did not go. Be careful about getting [in too

deep] because you'll be sorry later on. I felt so fragile for so long. I was so fragile. I just thought I was so torn down; I wouldn't be able to put myself back together. I just didn't want to go cry all the time. That's just not . . . it was my experience of being sad all of the time. I just didn't want to be sad. I want to be fun. I want to be happy. I want to be self-sufficient. I don't really need to have anybody else and I am . . . I'm okay to be by myself and I'm fine. I've gotten okay about myself. It's just . . . what do you say to that person to make it better? As a widow, I should be telling my friends, "you cannot make this better. I should be giving them permission to allow them to let me be sad and that would improve my relationships. My friends already knew that. I didn't have to say that but that would be a piece of advice for a young widow or widow . . . to give your friends permission to allow you to be sad. When someone's that sad, how do you console them? What in the world do you say? They don't have to fix it. They can't fix it. They can't make it go away.

Truer words were never spoken.

Researcher's Reflection

Going back to college was a blessing for me also. I could most likely use Beth's words, "It saved my life" and that would be true for me. It gave me momentum in something to get up and do in the mornings. Going to classes also pushed me out of the house. Grief and depression have an effect on a widow's desire to stay home all the time. Sleeping, watching TV, or crying became my life. I had to force myself to go to class and that was good for me. If I had not of had outside responsibilities, I just do not know

where I would be today. Though I worked full time, work was different. I did not consider work and education to be the same thing. It could be that I had to work and education was a choice I was doing for myself.

Unlike Beth, I went to four different grief support groups. The first two were probably too soon after Ron's death. The people in the group would just sit around and cry. I could do this at home. I wanted to be better. I wanted someone to share with me the secret of how to get better. The third group was through my church. Their philosophy consisted if a person did not accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior while alive; they were doomed for an eternity in Hell. Wow! You just do not tell a grieving widow that piece of news. I would describe Ron as more agnostic than anything else so the possibility of him accepting Jesus before he died was probably slim-to-none. That pretty much pushed me right over the ledge in the grief department. Not only feeling guilty that I could not resuscitate him as I did not know CPR the night he died, plus now, I had to worry about him spending eternity in Hell was just too much. A retired psychologist friend of mine held the final support group I attended. He had become a grief counselor after his own wife died. Whether the timing of the group, as it was about two years after Ron's death, or my friend knew what to say, this group did make me feel better. I would have to once again, agree with Beth on advising widows about grief support groups. You just never know what they are going to tell you and this is not the time to upset a widow even more than what she is already.

I remember friends who wanted to meet for lunch. I went a few times right after Ron's death but always ended up crying at the restaurant. Nobody wants to be around somebody that 'looses' it at any time. People fear what to say, how to act, and what to do

to make a widow feel better. They do not realize there is nothing they can do except let the widow journey through the grief process by herself. It takes time to get better. It takes time to be happy again and, lastly, it takes time to heal.

In chapter VI, I will introduce Vicki and Brenda, who have been widowed the longest amount of time of the participants.

CHAPTER VI

VICKI & BRENDA

Vicki had been widowed for almost 24 years that left her with two small children at the age of 31. Retired from a teaching profession, she has recently returned to education to obtain a doctorate degree in education to help solve social injustice.

Brenda had 40 years of living a widow's life. Now age 61, she enjoys taking classes that interest her. With a bachelor's and master's degree, she admitted a love of education. She now takes classes that interest her.

Vicki's Journey

In October it will be 24 years. That's a long . . . a lot has happened in twenty-four years. The nature of my husband's death; he was actually shot and killed by police in front of us. So, that was like very uncomfortable to talk about. I'm not sure if it was my being uncomfortable or if I perceived it. My older daughter [at age 10] witnessed her dad being killed also. She's now an activist working on the issues of police killing primarily black and brown men. Right now and I literally

mean like the years 2015 and 2016, it's becoming less patterned and I think it's because more and more people are sharing their story.

Vicki was the second of my participants that I interviewed via phone. At the time of her husband's death, she was a high school teacher. She has since retired from teaching and looked forward to new life experiences. Vicki, now 55 years old, had been a widow since the age of 31, twenty-four years ago. At the time of Vicki's husband's death, she had two little girls, ages one and ten years old. Vicki and her ten-year old daughter witnessed the murder. Her grief of losing her husband was compounded with the memories of that tragic day. It also may be worth mentioning that she never referred to her husband by name.

That's a long . . . a lot has happened in twenty-four years. I enjoyed teaching. I really loved teaching but when he died, pretty soon thereafter, I thought that financially, it would not work to raise my two daughters on a salary by myself, on a teacher's salary.

Vicki soon realized the financial difficulty of her family. She doubted if a teacher's salary satisfied their needs. Vicki considered becoming a school administrator; however, this required additional education that cost money.

Society: "It's almost like you have cooties"

Vicki's financial concerns worried her but she soon experienced society's stigma to widows. She felt that society overlooked widows; that loss became silenced and, due to

that loss, they became invisible members in society. Soon after widowhood, Vicki experienced yet another tragedy in her life when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I'm a breast cancer survivor. On the one hand, *it's almost like you have cooties*.

People like to stay away because they are uncomfortable with death and sickness.

A part of it was me. I wanted to withdraw a little bit. I have to say I am a

Buddhist, and there is a very . . . they have a very active and strong Buddhist

community, and so I'm not going to say that the world rallied around me. I don't

think [that] is an accurate description. I think it was more like if I asked for

support, people would come. So, I had to humble myself to ask for support, which

is kinda hard because sometimes you don't want to ask people. That was a

journey in and of itself. At the immediate time of my husband's death, there were

people who rallied around in support, but then I think as time went on, it was like,

"ok, how to we negotiate this?" Death in general, yes, is very uncomfortable for

people and people treat illness as if you had cooties.

Vicki experienced two events that society defined as uncomfortable to discuss – death and illness. People offered immediate support but also distanced themselves from her.

Vicki wanted to withdraw from life, but for her children's sake, she forced herself to ask for help. Her Buddhist community played a major role in offering support.

Relationships: "I was always hustling"

Asking for help was something that Vicki did not feel comfortable to do. She credited one special friend who offered to do household repairs, mow the lawn, and be supportive when Vicki took her cancer treatments.

There was actually one person. A good friend would say, “hey, do you need me to come and help you in the yard? Do you need me to come and help you and you know, he was the one person actually who sticks out in my mind that I did not have to ask but offered to be a support. He was really quite kind and supportive. Vicki’s family members did not live close to her and that made the transition to widowhood and a single parent even more difficult. She remembered, “always hustling” to make her schedule possible.

OK. Well, truth be told, I was by myself in Texas. I had a sister in North Carolina, a sister in New York and my parents in Savannah, Georgia. I would say my parents were the most supportive. Mostly in the summer, they, we would all go together and be with them in the summer for maybe two or three weeks in Georgia or North Carolina. Financially, mom would periodically send me a couple of hundred dollars, but it was nothing to be dependent upon. I was grateful for it, but it’s not like they were not supportive. Does that make sense? They were as supportive as they could have been under those circumstances. I guess that’s what I mean.

Vicki did not have any family close by, so she relied on friends, most of them from her Buddhist community. Her parents provided some relief with occasional small financial support and providing a reprieve for Vicki and her children during the summers in Georgia.

Education: “opened my eyes”

Vicki continued to take a class “here and there” working them into her work and family schedules. As a scholar early on in her career, Vicki continually wanted to learn new things. Initially, Vicki took classes to change careers for financial reasons but soon realized her main responsibility was to her children.

I was always hustling trying to figure out how could my kids be cared for so I could take a class here and there or how could I work a class into my life so it would not interfere with their life . . . I would say within one year of his dying, I started taking classes to become a principal. I did not finish the principal classes . . . Even though I didn’t really want to become a principal, I felt that was what I needed to do to be able to support my daughters. Then it was maybe one year into those courses or not even, that showed me that my children needed me more. They needed me as a human being more than they needed the money that I thought I could make as a principal. So, I let that goal completely alone . . . and I actually remained a teacher. I [have since] retired from teaching.

Vicki realized that her children came first no matter the financial cost she lost remaining a teacher.

Vicki took classes “that just interested me.” Education, for Vicki, opened her eyes to new things. She admitted that education was an evolving process.

After I decided I wasn’t going to become a principal, I continued to periodically take college classes that just interested me. If something interested me, I would take it. If I met someone and she was teaching a course on literature, I thought, “I’m going to take that.” So, yeah, that’s kinda been an evolving process. I would

say first and foremost for me mainly education *opened my eyes* to understand things I was either ignorant of or oblivious to [things]. Even I think as a high school teacher, which again, I loved being a high school teacher but there was part of me thinking, “ok, I need to expand myself.” [My] life had been impacted by this whole economic system that I didn’t even understand, so it [education] continues to broaden to open my eyes to understanding important things in myself. That’s how I would describe it. I think it’s kinda like . . . what’s that expression? . . . ignorance is bliss. I, I would have just been blissfully ignorant about so many things because I . . . you don’t know what you don’t know. (Vicki laughed) I mean, I just feel enriched and expanded now but if that hadn’t of happened, I would have been like, you know, like I don’t even know.

For Vicki, ignorance was not bliss. She continued to take classes she felt would “expand” and enrich her understanding of the world she lived in.

I do think education is part of our natural everyday life and at the same time, I enjoy the structure of reading a shared article, a book, and then getting together to discuss it. I enjoy that kind of situation. I do [enjoy education]. That’s truly the bottom line. I mean, I was thinking about it and I have something like five or six transcripts because I didn’t care where the course was offered. I kinda see myself as a truly lifelong learner and there are other languages I still want to learn. I’d like to learn French.

As a lifelong learner, Vicki sought opportunities to receive further education whenever she could, whether it was for a degree or not. She believed in the importance of a shared reading experience and discussion to further one’s growth.

Through her various classes, Vicki learned more about multiculturalism and finally stumbled upon a course that highlighted what she had witnessed in the experiences of her biracial daughters.

I thought about being a counselor so I took a class on multicultural counseling. I took other multicultural classes and I realized, “oh my gosh. This is like my third multicultural class but in that class, I learned about like white privilege. I learned about the formation of the identity of biracial children. My children are biracial so I was like “oh my gosh!” I felt so ignorant because I didn’t . . . I was clueless about understanding the challenges of identity formation of biracial children and here they were already well into adolescence. I was so ignorant of such an important aspect of my whole life and ok, same thing with . . . African American literature. Some things I’ll refer back to literature. I felt there was a whole world I was clueless about so even with the most recent degree I’m like, “oh my gosh!” . . . I didn’t even know the word “neoliberal.” I befriended a woman who taught a class on African American poetry or African American literature. I took that. I took a class on multi-cultural counseling.

Multicultural classes peaked Vicki’s interest on a personal level. Understanding the impact of White privilege and neoliberalism, she came to a new level of awareness about societal inequities in general and her biracial children’s experiences in particular. After taking a variety of classes on diversity, she selected a focus program of study.

What ended up happening is I had the two daughters and I actually took in a third daughter who was in high school with my younger daughter. So, by the time the

three of them had graduated from college was when I again visited going back to school for another degree and that's when I completed my second master's. Now, I'm going to start on a doctorate but, in between, I took courses periodically. Over the years, I continued to take noncredit graduate level courses, but it wasn't till they [three daughters] all finished with their degrees that then I did start on a more focused program. See for some people, education may or may not be a part of it. Education just happened to be that for me. You're focused on something outside of yourself.

It is quite remarkable, that although Vicki originally was compelled to seek further credentialing to increase her salary and provide her children with a more financially secure future, her vision was altered through the classes she was taking just out of interest. She settled for a more modest income, spent more time with her daughters and even adopted an additional girl into her family. Her education "for interest sake" provided her with a clear vision to pursue a master's degree in Educational Leadership and Social Change, one that would provide a critical, social justice perspective on society and possibilities for how to approach social change.

Identity: "I do consider myself a widow still"

Understanding society's perceptions of biracial stereotyping prompted Vicki to consider her own identity as a widow. She had learned that identity was both an external and internal concept. While her daughters defined their identity as biracial, Vicki identified herself as a widow.

When you think of your demographics, you think, “do I consider myself single or do I consider myself a widow?” and you know, I actually found myself pausing even with your little form, and thinking about that. I guess truth be told is *I do consider myself a widow still*.

Vicki did not share her ethnicity on the demographic information sheet I asked my participants to complete. However, she did select widow instead of the single category. She discussed her personal evolution and how timing affected her choices and growth.

Number 1, my husband dying has made me a stronger person. I think not having life insurance and having two small children forced me to like take my body up off the ground, take one-step after another, and figure out how to make it work. It has . . . You know, I am stronger and I am more independent. I am (Vicki hesitated) in some ways I would hope that maybe in the madness a little bit [more] humble than I was. I mean like maybe back then it’s like I had all the answers. I got, you know, I got this. I know this. But, I think that death and then later in my case it’s sickness, has the capacity to humble a person and as a matter of fact maybe you don’t know everything. Maybe you don’t have it all. So, that’s what I mean. At the same time, I would say ‘more courageous and less fearful’ because I think that like comes to the top of one of the things that would be a difficult thing to navigate in life. So, if you’ve been able to navigate that, then it diminishes some of the other potentially scary things that [you] might face. That was actually was my saving grace. I think if, if it had all happened at this stage of my life, it would have been a whole different kind of thing because you know, if you’re retired like I’m retired and I don’t have to do anything. If I want to, I can

stay home and watch TV all day. That's part of the process just making me stronger and not [to] wallow in self-pity. I'm a student . . . definitely a student, friend, and free spirit. I'd say I'm a hard worker and a traveler. When I say traveler, I'm on a journey. A traveler in terms of a journey in life, growing, learning, and that kind of thing both figuratively and mentally. The timing is everything.

Clearly having small children at the time would naturally catapult one to do whatever necessary to make sure they were well cared for, depressed, and grieving or not. Her husband's death literally made her pick her "body up off the ground" and forced her to become more independent. In the early stages, she felt responsible for all of the answers and looking back saw herself being humbled by those experiences, which certainly cannot exclude her encounter with breast cancer. Looking back, she looked at herself now and acknowledged being "more courageous and less fearful." Being retired she has the option to "sit back" and "do whatever." However, perhaps from the challenges of raising her girls as a widow with breast cancer, self-pity is not considered an option, only more education to continue her personal growth and enact solutions to inequities.

Reflecting on her identity as a grandmother to her six-year-old grandson, Vicki is motivated to make the world a better place for his future.

[I am] a person committed toward working for world peace and a just world. I am a retired teacher who's now, I hope, to become a scholar, activist, and practitioner. I know that sounds crazy, but I hope to work at the grass roots level in education while pursuing a doctoral degree. I would like to, at some point, to be able to teach on a college level to teach future teachers. That's one thing. Another

thing is I would like to be part of a team that puts into action and actualizes a school based on humanistic principles that I think are important in a school to create almost like a model school. How we approach discipline . . . how we approach working with parents . . . how we approach education of young people. I would like to be part of a team to do that. The other thing is I'd like to also work with other professionals who work on the ground [level] doing parent education and also being able to challenge ourselves. To polish my own communication skills and working with others to be able to have difficult conversations that I think we're afraid to have. Collaborating with others to make meaningful curriculum to help educators have frameworks to be as teachers [and] help incorporate some of these ideas about social justice issues. It sounds kinda vague and it kinda is, but if I were to articulate it, that's what it would be.

Vicki's goals are to enact social justice in ways that can benefit children. First, she would like to incorporate a more humanistic type of teacher education training at the college level. In addition, she could foresee herself as a team member of a collaborative initiative to create a humanistic school model to help educate children from an early age in a model distinct from what we see in the public schools, one that would incorporate difficult conversations and forward a peace education agenda. Her goals of teamwork, collaboration, communication, and social justice, for Vicki, promised a road of welcome challenges.

Advice: “You have to start dreaming now”

Vicki explained the difficulty of some conversations about widowhood. She thought that one of the most important things to keep in mind was to focus on the positive memories of the spouse and to not focus on the loss, avoiding self-pity.

Well, having been in that situation for the last 24 years I can say there are a few things I could kinda share and the very first one is to focus on the love and the good memories and not the loss. That goes back on that wallowing in self-pity stuff. So, by focusing on the happy times we did share and the love and the joy we shared helps to diminish the sense of loss. You have a choice to focus on one or the other. So the more [you] focus on the loss and I miss him, I miss him and the more you focus on that, the less you appreciate on what you did have.

In addition to encouraging that one not focus on the loss, Vicki acknowledged that it “truly does take time,” implying that nothing is automatic or fast. She also added that one must learn to disrupt and re-orient one’s previous ideal, of growing old together.

I believe that all couples who love each other share either openly or discretely that they want to grow older together and they may share jokes about it. Oh, when we’re old this and that, this and that . . . but what I realized is that dream is officially over. It will never happen. You will not grow older with that person. I always encourage them, “ok, *you have to start dreaming now*. What are your dreams? Because your deceased partner would have wanted you to be happy. So, what are dreams you have and what’s stopping you from working towards them?”

Vicki highlighted “time:” the time it takes to heal and the challenge of altering one’s vision of one’s future because of the spouse’s death. New dreams need to be created, which may be challenging without one’s life partner. Vicki acknowledged in the beginning of her widowhood she had to battle some unhealthy thinking about finances.

She did not want to disappoint her children, perhaps wanted some relief from her constant sacrifices, and, yet, was not certain about the debt she would be facing.

I recognized in myself a kind of very unhealthy way of thinking for a few years that I had to get control of. It had to do with money and spending because, on the one hand, I thought, “well nothing really matters. What was I anyway? It doesn’t matter anyway.” I got myself into a lot of debt that way. It was really foolish because I wasn’t . . . (Vicki was silent and paused in her conversation) *that* became a big burden on my heart and mind. I would say also be very thoughtful, responsible, and, mature to live in such a way that you cannot be a burden on your children and you know, you can maintain your life. I looked for something to make me happy. I’m going to buy it and I don’t care that I don’t have the money for it. Heck, we’re all going to die anyway so I deserve it. It’s just a kinda-like a foolish way to live and the other piece was the children. Oh the poor things, they want this. I’m going to do whatever they want to kinda fill that hole in their heart. It was not a smart way to think when I look back. I wasn’t as careful as I should have been.

By purchasing material items, Vicki searched for something that would fill the void to happiness or provide a reward, even for just a short time. While she remembered how foolish this was, at the time shopping provided some emotional gratification.

She resisted attending grief support groups. Vicki now believed support groups were helpful to new widows.

Find a some kind of grief recovery program, and if the first or second or third one doesn't work for you, don't give up because they don't need you, you need them. Ultimately, what helped me was this grief recovery handbook. You find another person who's grieving and you go through this handbook together. That helped me a lot. I liked the intimacy of working with one other person [and] not like a whole support group. That really did help me quite a bit. Don't just isolate yourself. You truly are not the only person who is suffering through that . . . but to find other people that you can navigate that grieving process with, I think that would also be I would say very helpful advice. I've been to counseling and I've tried support groups, but I do think the process is important to enlist someone.

Vicki seemed to prepare a more one-on-one approach to grief support. She read a book with another widow and they shared. She also sought counseling. She was not opposed to suggesting a grief support for others as helpful. She simply felt better in a one-on-one situation for processing her grief.

Researcher's Reflection

Speaking with Vicki reminded me of many things that I too experienced during this journey. First, there comes a time when you have to either "take one step after another and figure out how to make it work" as Vicki stated or basically give up and die yourself. I am not sure if that trait could be referred to as determination, courage, or plain stubbornness. Widows do have a choice in how they proceed with their lives. I

thought, “do I want to be happy for the rest of my life or do I want to be forever sad?” Happiness was my choice but it was a long process to get there.

Spending money and buying material items did make me feel better also. I supposed some individuals choose food, alcohol, exercise, or shopping, but we all seem to have a sense of relief in times of stress and grief. It is sad to reflect that growing old together and sitting on the front porch will never happen. Unless my situation changes, I too, will grow old by myself and that is both sad and scary. Life is not supposed to work out this way.

During the entire conversation, Vicki never once mentioned her husband’s name. This was something I felt as odd and unusual. However, the more I thought about it afterward, I wondered if those 24 years distanced Vicki from the person her husband was and replaced him with only a memory. Over time, one forgets little things like certain aspects of what someone looked like, the sound of his voice, or a mannerism you thought was humorous or maybe one that drove you crazy. Time robs those little memories from us and the result distances ourselves from our loved one. It could be because it hurts too bad to try and remember. It is easier this way and maybe that is the way healing from grief has been purposely designed for us. It is entirely possible that we could not survive any other way.

Brenda's Journey

It's so far back in my memory. I don't really remember being married and I never remarried. Never had any children. Didn't want any children. Well, he died when I was really, really young . . . we were both really young. I was twenty-four and so, I really don't remember. We had been married just short of three years and so, I don't even really remember being married really. I just remember being single.

Brenda, now age 61, had been a widow the longest time of all my participants. Married for almost three years, Brenda became a widow in her early twenties. She had remained a widow for the last 37 years. She admitted to dating periodically but never wanted to get serious with anyone again. Brenda repeatedly asked if I thought her story would benefit this study since she had been married such a short time. She never mentioned her husband's name throughout the duration of the interview. Considering her current age, her brief marriage and that Brenda's widowhood started in the 1970s, these factors taken together shaped Brenda's story, especially with the prevalent social norms.

Her demeanor was congenial but also very frank about her marriage. As a transcriptionist for a law firm, Brenda arrived at the coffee shop on her way to work very professionally dressed in black slacks, black jacket, and high heels.

Society: "It is not their fault really"

According to Brenda, men and women thought differently 37 years ago when her husband died. During this time, it was customary to remarry especially for young widows such as Brenda.

I was so young and it was so long ago, that like I said, I really don't remember ever being married. So, I'm kinda an unusual case. If I had been married for 20 or 30 years, it would have been a whole different situation [or] had children. I would . . . I would feel completely different. I mean my life would have always been as part of a relationship and it hasn't been. *It's been me, just me.* (Brenda folds her arms on the table)

In Brenda's case, she had spent the majority of her life single, not married, like the other study participants. She never had children and has been a well-educated, single professional woman since her mid-twenties.

Brenda commented on how most widows experienced fear, although that was not her story. "It's been me, just me." Speaking about her experience, Brenda said:

Just not really being afraid 'cause I think a lot of that is based on fear. (Brenda frowned) Women not being able to . . . they don't feel secure, they feel like they have got to have a male person to see about them, and you know, I see it all around me but I never have been that way.

Brenda noted how women, at least in her generation, felt the pressure of conforming to couple norms, and as a result, might feel uncomfortable not only because of their loss but also because they were now without a male partner.

Brenda again pointed out that she had never relied on any man and that included her husband.

Now that I've been single as long as I have, I'm older and I realize things about men and their role in society [and] women's role in society, I'm just . . . you

know, I really am not interested at all. I'm not a feminist. I definitely support equal pay for equal work and so on but I'm not an activist.

While Brenda denied being a feminist, however, she realized that, over time and with experiences, she gained a new perspective and began to define societal norms and roles differently.

Well, they're [widows who may ascribe to dominant norms] socialized that way. I mean *it is not their fault really*. I worked in legal [field] and a lot of them were very overbearing and I'm sure even though it was not ever you know, maybe stated out right, they were obviously the male and the one in charge. They [men] don't understand. (Brenda rolled her eyes) Older men, like men like maybe 10-20 years older than me and in my mom's generation. It's really hard for them to wrap their head around a woman on her own and you know, the economic opportunity is what allows me to do this. To be able to go out and get a job and take care of myself, but I'm hoping that patriarchy is on its way out. It's just more women are working now and more women are going to college than men. Hillary [Clinton] just broke through the glass, the big glass ceiling. I don't know. I mean, I think it could happen. You know, you deal with men who are, especially the older guys, and that's just the world they grew up in. I mean the woman stays at home and they had a good job. Things are just changing and "yes," I do think it will be different for women. It's always changing. It's [education] going to open doors for women and men are going to find out that women are, just as capable of doing what they do as they are. So, hopefully, maybe we'll see more matriarchy and less patriarchy. (Brenda crossed her fingers and smiled)

Brenda seemed convinced men's ages regulated the way they perceived a widow's ability to care for herself. According to Brenda, older aged men traditionally believed married women had a husband to lean on while a widow was inept to assume responsibilities. As she mentioned, "they were obviously the male and the one in charge." Brenda believed the world had begun to change and perhaps, these same men had begun to think differently.

Relationships: "It's been me, just me"

When Brenda began to put her life together again after her husband's death, she preferred to be alone. She knew family members worried about her and were there to support her if needed.

I was pretty much you know, left alone to do my thing. I mean, they, my family were real supportive. I knew that they were really worried for a while until they saw I was going to be okay. I've grown a lot as a person just being part of the family but that happens to everybody as they get older. Your family relationships change and you have a different viewpoint on family. I took . . . I think the shock. It took about a year to really start to wear off and then it's just time you know.

Time takes care of a lot of things. (Brenda smiled and looked down)

Brenda was grateful to have such a supportive family and her view of family evolved with time. She noted that time, for her, played a major role in her healing.

Identity: “It was like onward”

Even a short time of widowhood can change one’s personality dramatically but Brenda had much longer to grow into the person she was today. “Oh my gosh . . . well, that’s like almost 40 years.” As Brenda talked, she searched for the right word to describe herself during her early days of widowhood (Brenda frowned).

It’s one word that basically means being able to take care of yourself. Not feeling like you have to have somebody take care of you. Like . . . that, you have to have a man around. Maybe it will hit me. It starts with an “s” [Brenda mentally searched for the word ‘self-sufficiency’] but a big part of outreach was to help women to make it on their own with feeling like they were stuck in this situation because they couldn’t do it themselves. I mean, there are women like that *all over the place*. (Brenda enunciated this last part) [I have] worked with abused [women] as a volunteer. These women do not, they don’t think they can make it on their own. It’s everywhere out there and you know it’s right back into that cycle. Brenda believed women “stuck” in situations such as widowhood, divorce, or abuse thought they could not “make it on their own.” Since she volunteered with various women’s groups, seeing their situations only intensified her belief this was a cyclical problem in society.

Brenda described herself as a self-reliant person and this being just a part of who she was, which probably influenced her not seeking another marriage.

A big part of that is self-reliance. No, I think it’s because I had the type of personality that I do. I just went on. I mean *it was like onward*. (Brenda raised one arm in the air) I didn’t even think about it. I certainly didn’t go looking for a

husband. (Brenda winked and smiled) I mean, you know, that was not on . . . I mean, I dated but I was like do I really want to get married again. ***NO!*** I just didn't feel the urge to get married. I'm not lonely. I've never been a lonely person.

Brenda expressed an adamant “*NO*” to find another husband and seemed to be content with herself and no one else in her life.

In fact, Brenda thought that if she had stayed married to her husband her life would have had a completely different trajectory in terms of freedom and choices.

He was very traditional. He would have been very traditional as a husband. You know the husband [who] makes the big decisions. My husband was very conservative financially and I wouldn't of had . . . I wouldn't have been able to travel the way I did or probably even go to school like I did because I would have been working full time, all the time and I just . . . my life took a totally different trajectory based on the fact that I remained single. It took a completely . . . I had complete freedom to pursue whatever I wanted to pursue and I'm not a real conformist type person so and if I decided to do something, I just pretty much did it and some people would call me as being a little on the flakey side. Some people might think of it as being free spirited. I would have *never* been able to live like that if I had been married. So my life, you know, would have been completely different than what it would have been if I had stayed married.

Brenda's personality did not easily conform to a conservative and controlling husband.

She realized her travels and education would not have happened if she remained married.

She seemed to focus on all of her accomplishments as a single woman rather than consider the loss of her husband and the marriage she once had.

Education: "I will always be a student"

With a bachelor's degree and two master degrees, library science and history, Brenda shared her love for education. While married, Brenda attempted to complete her bachelor's degree by taking a class periodically. "I remember when we read about the different religions, Protestant religions, well different religions in the United States and how they were correlated with socio economics status, that's, that's when it [education] grabbed me." Brenda added these classes peaked her future interest for more education.

I took . . . I took a couple of classes. Yep. The first thing I wanted to do after he died, was finish my degree. Yes, I always wanted, always knew, I should go to college. I had the ability to go to college you know, and I . . . my marriage interrupted that. Yeah, and I still go to school. *I will always be a student*. The last class I took was astronomy, which I always wanted to take and it was really great. And you know, I'm just a life time learner. I just love going to school and I'll always go as long as I can.

Brenda's first goal as a widow was to complete her bachelor's degree. With a love for education, this degree extended to more degrees.

Brenda loved to learn and spoke of the non-tangible benefits that one might not consider.

It really helps your self-confidence. It just, it opens doors. It opens doors that otherwise might not be open to you. Jobs and . . . I don't know, it just kinda gives

you . . . it gives you a different world view. I think college changes you in fundamental ways as a person. It just opens up your horizons. Everyone should do it. It just gives you a more . . . you see the world in a different way especially being a sociology major. You just don't make judgements on other cultures and you know when you come on things like that, it changes your world view . . . I am growing. Just pretty much self-sufficient, becoming more and more and more as the years go by . . . more and more independent. I am a growing person. I am on a journey you know, growth, and I keep learning, learning, learning, all the time. I just keep growing as a person and hopefully becoming more 'other' oriented . . . You know, I'm just, not ever going to stop going to school.

Brenda believed she would always take a class periodically and had already planned for next semester's classes. "I'm thinking about botany or maybe zoology. Yeah, it was sorta-kinda like what do I do now?" She demonstrated a lust for learning and doing. In addition, she found education key to "open doors" and giving "you a different world view." "Growth" was pivotal in her own self-realization. She appeared to be a strong proponent for everyone to get a college education.

International travel had made Brenda a "different person," learning about cultural diversity. Taking classes or visiting other countries, Brenda defined both as "a form of education" for her.

I've done a lot of traveling around the world and that you know, that *really* [she said emphatically] changes you in a big way. Now, that's not . . . it's a form of education. It's just made me a completely different person. I mean, every

educational experience that I've had has changed me. I would say pretty much 99%.

While traveling, Brenda was in several different contexts that made her reflect on her own experiences in relation to the ones to which she was exposed, producing other instances of growth, awareness, and ultimate transformation.

Advice: "I'm going to be an education proponent"

Brenda's advice included further education, travel and serving others.

I just love school period. And I so *I'm going to be an education proponent* when you ask me a question like that and travel, I think travel is real important. Travel is education. Yeah. Less focus on me and more focus on the people I come into contact with every day. Do your thing. Be true to yourself. That's what I would tell her. Don't be afraid to tackle anything.

By emphasizing travel, education and serving in her life, Brenda felt like she became more self-actualized and confident that she was where she needed to be in life.

She did not attend a support group after her husband's death, however, she thought it certainly was a smart idea.

Go to a support, get support, go to a support group. No, [I didn't] but and I don't have any regrets that I didn't but they're out there and so talk to people who are in the same position you are in. They'll support you. I definitely would say go to a support group. They'll support you. Really think about, know about, and understand [what] you've experienced but, that's like anything. He [Brenda's husband] died in 1979. You didn't hear much about grief [back then].

Brenda remembered grief support groups were nonexistent when she became a widow, but she had read many books, that addressed grief and healing.

Education came in a variety of formats whether a support group, books, or conversation. Whatever the form that a widow selected, Brenda thought that it should be her decision but she needed to understand how important knowledge and growth was for her future as a person and in employment.

Go for it because it will open doors for you that would never have been open to you. You've got to have that college degree. You just have to have it period. It doesn't matter what it's in. It doesn't matter. Just get the paper. Get it because if you don't have a college degree in this day and time, you're not going anywhere. You're going to go backwards probably. It's getting so bad. I don't know in the world a person could function without a degree. It would be one avenue definitely, because it would . . . probably over the course of a lifetime we're going to make more money and that's part of self-sufficiency. *Absolutely!*

As a widow, Brenda appeared a prime example of someone who had reached a level of self-sufficiency, independency, and peace in her life.

Researcher's Reflection

Listening to Brenda recall her life as a widow provided me with even more determination to inform other widows their life is not over. Just as Brenda mentioned, "Don't be afraid to tackle anything" needs broadcasted within society to inform widows they still have choices to make. They still are alive and they still have a future even though their life had changed.

Brenda's credit to education was something else she and I had in common. I had always desired to have a bachelor's degree. Though I took some classes directly out of high school, I could not say I even had an associate's degree. It was not that my parents would have not paid for my education or my lack of ability, but more like, I'll just get married and start a family. Though I certainly did not regret marriage and my children, I regretted immensely the fact that I did not have a bachelor's degree. I remember fading into the background at work if my peers began to compare what university they attended and their selected fields of study. What was I supposed to say? Oh, I don't have any type of degree? No, I was extremely embarrassed about this. I vowed to myself when my children got older and could drive themselves to all of those teenager functions, I was going to go back to college and get a bachelor's degree. I am not sure why I decided to go for the master's and now the doctorate degree. I would have to agree with Brenda on this. I always found school interesting and enjoyable and I did not know how much knowledge was out there waiting for me to discover it. Now, I have stopped from being embarrassed about my lack of education to someone who is proud of what I have accomplished.

Again, like Vicki, Brenda never once mentioned her husband's name. I found this to be interesting also along with perhaps odd. As I mentioned, it appears time does take care of many things to the point of dehumanizing someone and replacing that person as a distant memory. Ron was a part of my life for 34 years and I have many memories. I hope forgetting or distancing myself to that does not happen to me.

The analysis, synthesis, and conclusions for widows' experiences investigated through a feminist lens follow in chapter VII.

CHAPTER VII

ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS:

WIDOW EXPERIENCES INVESTIGATED THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

While it remains logical to assume that widows realize that they are no longer considered a wife by the definitions of society, there continues an underlying confusion for them as to exactly who they have become now. Sherry did not define herself as a widow and had to remind herself that “oh, I’m Tony’s widow . . . I still refer to myself as Tony’s wife.” Her daughter defined her mother as “she’s not single, she’s a widow” something that Sherry admitted to not ever thinking about herself in that way. Beth explained her identity now, as “I am not single. Widows aren’t single – single – forever – single as never been married single and you’re not divorced – single.” So, exactly where does a widow fit into society and how is she supposed to find her identity in a culture where individuals appear to fear death and therefore, tend to avoid relationships with a widow?

In this chapter, I used a feminist lens to describe how capitalist patriarchy affects widows’ experiences. I included multiple theorists throughout this study but predominately refer to Nel Noddings’, ethics of care, and Belenky et al. (1997), *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, to explain how women are characterized in society. I continued with

the history of patriarchy in the United States and analyzed its influence on gender norms and the learning experiences these participants used to define their identities as widows.

These narratives explained how the participants defined their relationships with community, church, friends, and family members along with how informal and formal learning helped them to discover their identity as widows. Lastly, a summary of one woman's journey as a widow and the changes she experienced in herself along the way appears to reflect the thoughts of all the widows in this study.

Feminist theory helps us understand the patriarchal framework that has shaped the experiences of widows, specifically in the Midwest, United States. This analysis discusses the influence of patriarchal societal norms in the participants' experiences, specifically in their social and economic interactions. In addition, Noddings' concept of care sheds light on the needs and concerns of widows. Throughout the widows' experiences of negotiating reality without their spouses, the women "live and learn" through roadblocks and new openings, through both formal and informal education. I especially focused on the distinct social interactions and changes in relationships that widows experienced and the role education played in their evolution and learning. The language of power relations was deeply embedded in the widows' discussion of their experiences.

In exploring the experiences of widows as a form of informal education, I turn to Belenky et al.'s text, *Women's Ways of Knowing* as a lens to explain the "learning experiences" of widows. Care and relationships are not without empathy, and they are fundamental to our humanity and growth. As Noddings (1984) explains, caring relationships receive and provide empathy. After empathy develops in relationships, then

and only then can individuals, share experiences and attempt to understand each other's situations. This interaction results in the transmission of care and compassion to build a relationship.

When the death of a spouse occurs, women may experience intellectual and emotional challenges that force them to reshape their lives and ways of thinking in order to bring order to their new reality. While Belenky et al. (1997) focus specifically on gendered ways of knowing that result from the patriarchal structure of society and its socializing institutions, I propose to study within that area, the category widowhood, which considers marital status in addition to gender. Sherry and her daughter remind us that Sherry did not consider herself "single," nor did society. She had the status of a wife experiencing the 'loss of her husband', the loss of the man who afforded her a 'completeness' that she did not have without him.

'Knowing' through the concept of capitalist patriarchy has been central to feminist theories to describe power and control in society. Second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Ann Cudd, Nel Noddings, and Susan Brison, to name but a few, examined society during the 1960s in the way society *perceived* women in power as an exception to a collectively held view of women's *role* in society. Rather than saying that individual men oppress women, most feminists understand that oppression of women comes from the underlying patriarchal structure of society (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005).

Kate Millett (2000) describes a patriarchal society "like all other historical civilizations . . . the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance – in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive

force of the police, is entirely in male hands” (p. 38). The social control of patriarchy has simply been the result of what has been socially determined as the male gender that, in turn, has led to the development of gender segregation and male dominance. Gender is, therefore, a social construct developed by society to divide and explain differences among individuals based upon biology. Nicholson (1997) believes that while one’s gender was originally determined from a biological standpoint, each individual socially learns how to become male and female through his or her thoughts and actions experienced. Therefore, patriarchy is a hierarchical structure but also contains positions within that require individuals to act in particular ways dependent on their status in this hierarchy.

This research is about loss and loss is inextricably tied to the emotional. However, in a capitalist society it is commonly assumed that capitalism engenders an emotional world valuing efficiency and productivity. Calculated relationships based on self-interest are valued over authentic relationships, which may not bear any value economically. It is within this context of a capitalist patriarchy that widows tried to navigate their lives, returning to previous relationships that were once based on one’s couple status, which now had little traction.

Though perhaps not always noticeably obvious, patriarchy sways the taken-for-granted ideology of societies that ultimately makes women’s lives subordinate or dependent on the lives of men. bell hooks (2006) suggests, "We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic" (p. 42). This normalization, as hooks describes it, requires additional attention into patriarchal frameworks that not only affect women

generally but also calls for an even deeper investigation into the subset category of widows through both formal and informal educational means.

The “invisible college,” or informal education, as Belenky et al. (1997) assert, represents the many venues women learn from other than being in a formal classroom setting, that play a significant role in one’s understanding of themselves and the world they live in. Belenky et al. (1997) maintain that, “education need not be narrowly defined . . . women don’t just learn in classrooms; they learn in relationships, by juggling life demands, by dealing with crises in families and communities” that they call the “invisible college” . . . (p. xi). Relationships, life experiences, media, church, along with family and community interactions are just a few examples. The invisible college teaches women how the world perceives them and how they define themselves via public and private spheres regarding self-identity, power, relationships, and morality (Belenky et al., 1997). Women’s identities are, therefore, formed through the mingling of multiple sources of life’s *invisible college*.

Feminist critiques of dominant conceptions of knowledge and ways of knowing have constructed their analyses on the false, yet universal dichotomy between the productive, 'public' sphere assigned to men versus the reproductive or 'private' sphere assigned to women (Ortner, 1974). Women's private sphere experience and knowledge as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters has been valued less and considered less important than men's activity and knowledge in the public sphere (Rose, 1983). As Brenda mentioned, women do not resist a patriarchal framework because “they [women] don’t feel secure, they feel like they have got to have a male person to see about them. It is not their fault really.” Additionally, women, coupled with married to men may enjoy social

and economic benefits because of conforming to a more submissive role in the relationship. In contrast, the private or reproductive work that women do involves different capabilities than the productive work that men do. The emotional caring and nurturing in serving others cannot easily be separated out from daily activities, making it impossible to distinguish what is labor—which is what is of value, according to mainstream society— and what is not (Rose, 1983).

Analysis

In the following data analysis, I will explain how a patriarchal society has produced the social norms that in effect, restrict widows' freedom in their thoughts, actions, and desires. Up until now, I have included my own experiences in a *researcher's reflection* following each participant's narrative. For the data analysis, however, I have included myself as one of the study's participants. Each of us varied in age and in the length of time as widows. All were Caucasian. Each widow was distinct in the intersectional characteristics that defined her as a unique woman, but we, myself included, all share one commonality, – we are all widows.

The loss of a male spouse ultimately forces a widow to think and act differently than she did before as a wife. Belenky et al. (1997) suggest that if widows were accustomed to their husbands taking charge of certain situations while married, a strong possibility would exist that she “would have little awareness of [her] intellectual capabilities” (p. 134) to resolve issues on her own. A realization that she can resolve problems independently develops internally through learning from experiences.

The participants learned, through the ‘invisible college,’ that men have easier access to more power and authority in the everyday world than single women. Historically, men have written the laws and recorded the historical events to prepare the next generation with the knowledge to continue society. Educational curriculum has also been under the control of patriarchy in preparing students in how society functions and what historical events are deemed worthwhile knowledge to include in textbooks. Due to this patriarchal influence on formal and informal education, education may not always consider the needs of women for empowerment, namely leadership skills (Belenky, 1997). According to Belenky et al. (1997), women need opportunities for “expressing themselves in public so that others will listen, in gaining respect of others for their minds and their ideas, and in fully utilizing their capabilities and training in the world of work” (p. 5). A widow’s ability to recover from her loss and succeed in society depends on society’s perceptions of her status as a woman as well as the social, economic, and educational opportunities in being responsible for herself and her family. Patriarchal effects multiply when a woman enters widowhood.

Patriarchy and sexism

The participants in this study did not appear to, or may not have considered patriarchal influences until an incident occurred that turned out differently than they imagined. With a husband who usually dealt with repair work, now it was up to the woman to network and trust another man possibly entering the house to do work. The widow status translates to ‘loss of husband/man’. Once again, widows experienced individuals treating them differently than wives. Jennifer remembered, “at first, it was

everything broke down and it was sit in your puddle and cry. I relied on *him* and *he's* not here . . . it was *his* job with that . . . now it's all my job." Vulnerability for Beth had now become a way of life and the fear of anyone knowing she lived by herself frightened her. Usual replies consisted of, "let me talk to my husband and I'll get back with you. I don't really know if they [strangers] are telling me the truth." A patriarchal society contains sex roles, an elaborate system that promotes a code of ethics and particular behaviors for men and women (Millett, 2000). The power and control of individuals who try to take advantage of oppressed groups, such as the elderly, disabled, impoverished, etc., threaten widows also. Widows become vulnerable, as Millett (2000) says, to the "birthright priority whereby males rule females . . . through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics (p. 38). In addition, Millett contends that role, temperament, and status are social constructs society has cultivated due to gender differences.

The following experiences reflect how two widows felt the need to protect themselves financially and personally, perhaps not unlike that of single or divorced women. Linda's policy of always getting at least three estimates, usually more, to safeguard herself against dishonest repair people to Beth's giving household items away instead of trying to sell them due to not wanting buyers to know where she lived, suggested the difference in behavior as a widow from that of a wife, who knew her husband could either be the one to assume these tasks or be there with her as she did.

Financial security became another concern. Employment was a key issue for most participants also, as they asked "What now?" and "How do I support me and my family financially?" Jennifer mentioned her only option to find employment depended on if the person felt sorry for her.

Not only does a widow experience a change in social norms with the death of a spouse but she also experiences sexism to a greater degree than a wife does. Sexism, although a term more often used in the 1970s and 1980s, continues to describe gender inequities in society along with how these norms continue to flourish and thrive into the next generation. Sadly, some society members do not question or perhaps even notice that these inequities exist in their everyday world. Patriarchal norms have become “common sense” and go unquestioned. Feminist, Judith Williamson (1978) predicted that sexism would not disappear in society but we, as members, will no longer talk about it. This should add even more concern to the invisibility of norms that ground themselves into culture and affect how its members understand their reality.

Valentine et al. (2014), claim that sexism remains in society and continues to influence individuals in subtle yet effective ways. These authors argue that “we rarely name the negative treatment of women as sexism in academic research . . . an unintended consequence of this is that patriarchy as a form of power relations has become relatively neglected and hidden” (p. 410). Susan Douglas (2010) explains it is normal for current day feminists to accept yesterday’s derogatory labels and stereotypes for women as a sign of opposition to patriarchy that these expressions no longer have the power to influence women as they once had. However, I argue that in the case of the widow, she negotiates both a new sexism as a result of the loss of her husband, who gave her a certain status and identity as wife, and, while gaining this awareness, she continues to suffer from a very major loss in her life.

Patriarchy also designs the norms for women’s thoughts and actions. She wears the labels of someone who nurtures, encourages relationships, behaves submissively, and

accepts patriarchal norms as part of everyday life. West and Zimmermann (1987) call such characteristics a part of gender performance that adheres to the expectations of society, meaning gender is socially constructed and presented every day in the actions of individuals.

Relationships and care

Widowhood adds another characteristic to traditional ideas of intersectionality. Sociologist and gender researcher, Sally Hines (2015) explains intersectionality as an overlap of characteristics. She further mentions that intersectional characteristics “systematically interweave to give shape to one another” (p. 34) and remain an important concept in feminist theory to understand relationships and care for women. In addition, to gender, race, age, class, disability and religion, I argue that in a patriarchal society it is also important to consider a woman’s loss of her male spouse. At least initially, this can alter a widow’s degree of access, increase her vulnerability, and lessen her power and credibility.

Marilyn Freedman (2000) views care and relationships as consisting of community ties that individuals share, such as languages, behaviors, beliefs, and traditions. These commonalities are what unite a group to develop and continue relationships with each other. When one is included in such a group, that person experiences a comradeship with and support from other members regarding this characteristic, but when a life event may eliminate that characteristic that bonded her to that group, she is left trying to negotiate an exclusionary experience and finds herself in search of belonging. What a widow experiences may or may not be similar to another

widow. While widows share in gender, widowhood experiences vary in characteristics such as age, race, economic status, religion, and education. Through empathy and communication, individuals experience ways to understand themselves and the world through relationships.

Although societal members gain knowledge of their role in society through associations with family and community, each person's scope of learning becomes distinct to them as an individual. Social expectations continue to mold gender behavior and to exert conformity upon society's members (Belenky et al., 1997). Families rear children with different perspectives and guidelines, community composition varies due to membership differences in race, class, age, geographical location, and socioeconomics, and nations share unique thoughts with their citizens, however, all relationships combine to form an individual's identity. Due to such diversity in intersectional traits, it is important to note how one or all can influence any characteristic attributed to a widow's experiences.

Historically, humans need social interaction to survive and widows are no exception. Relationships are important to provide comfort, companionship, and support in everyday life but also in situations that threaten an individual's mental and emotional health such as the death of a loved one. All of the widows in this study either personally experienced or witnessed the struggle of relationships with family members, close friends, and community acquaintances because of the death of their husband.

These seven widows shared narratives about learning experiences depended on their involvement with community, religion/spirituality, family, and friends since becoming a widow. The majority of these women experienced distinct changes in their

relationships to others and shared their interpretations as to perhaps the reasons for these changes.

Community

The prevalent patriarchal society continually constructs relationships and gender roles, shaping and reforming theories, history, and values to maintain domination and authority. With a male-dominant perspective, oftentimes women's ways of experiencing or learning and knowing are less valued and therefore less prominent. Women have been socialized to receive their cues for how to see themselves and others through the dominant male lens. Patriarchy has historically influenced women's perceptions of men as protectors while promoting men into the positions of power and control, such as family heads, decision makers, and the major breadwinner in the family. These gender roles were evident in the interviews with the majority of the participants. The unwritten rules of a capitalist patriarchy, or "invisible college," deemed a certain short efficient recovery time for widows to "get on with life" or act in a "quiet, reserved, and restrained" manner.

Without the husband at their side, all of the women felt a degree of vulnerability, and therefore, they took more precautions. Women tend to use their relationships with men to understand and identify themselves, as marriage is recognized by the state and socially (Belenky et al., 1997). Beth feared new friendships with both men and women and admitted, "I really don't know if they [strangers] are telling me the truth." while Linda remained cautiousness of men. Linda believed men would be more apt to take advantage of widows than women would, especially in areas husbands generally assumed responsibility in such as mechanic and home repair. Patriarchal norms generally remained

the standard inside and outside the family as well as well as in the church and work settings. The husband represented strength, protection for mother and child, economic stability, and class with men's characteristics making them highly attractive and desirable to women (Millett, 2000). With the loss of the husband, the widows reflected vulnerability in all of these areas.

Hopes and fears factor into a widow's search for self-identity and relationships. Though memories continually influence a widow's identity, hopes and fears influence how she recovers from grief (Thompson & Janigan, 1988). For Beth, fear became a recurrent enemy and affected her relationships with people she meets or plans to meet after nine years as a widow. Beth hesitated to return my calls to set up this interview because she did not know me personally, even though we shared a mutual friend. Once we met, she admitted her fears in meeting new people. To compensate for this fear, for example, she continued to open the garage door and talk to Joe (her deceased husband) in order to ward off potential intruders following her home. Her ability to form relationships with new people dramatically declined along with her comfort level in developing new relationships. This stage of isolation and fear is not uncommon. In fact, this may be a part of what Belenky et al. (1997) mention as the need for separation that will lead to greater autonomy.

Religion/spirituality

Relationships with God and fellow church members were important to these participants. Differences in religion were apparent in this study that included Buddhism, Catholicism, and general spirituality along with different socioeconomic classes. Religion

and spirituality were pillars that participants clung to for wisdom, guidance, and comfort. Linda's relationship with God suffered due to blaming Him for taking Bill away from her. Realizing she needed His healing brought her back to the relationship. One participant had a strong belief system and automatically turned to Him for comfort and guidance when she became a widow.

Belenky et al. (1997) describes the 'inner voice' as "central to the knowing process . . . [people] learn by listening" (p. 36-37). The inner voice can mean one's intuition. For Sherry that represented God speaking to her. For a widow, she is faced with finding her own way and resisting dwelling in the past. Receiving words of wisdom can affect the learning acquired from this source (Belenky et al., 1997). Women often define themselves in relationship to an authority figure, spirituality or "inner voice." Through experiences, Linda rediscovered her relationship with God and credited Him for ultimately showing her the way back to life not only for herself but also for her family.

Beth had an especially difficult time in her grief, as her relationships at church proved devastating for her. Without a desire to continue living, Beth admits, "I totally closed down . . . I was going to die myself and that would have been okay." She felt as if the church members did not support her in the death of Joe but instead, tried to alleviate her grief by inviting her to a church singles dance within one month of his death. This insensitivity made Beth feel less valued, as is, by church members because she was not ready to date or dance; her sense of isolation increased. The interlinking of emotions form the development of a woman's voice, mind, and identity (Belenky et al., 1997). Separating from the church, Beth discovered another church home and was working on

developing relationships there but admitted to her difficulty to meeting new people. New relationships proved difficult to develop and maintain.

Friends

The initial year, or in some cases, the multiple years after becoming a widow, remains the most difficult in the recovery process and, therefore, this time for receiving proper care is critical. Noddings (2012) explains that caring relations include all associations from the shortest duration to the longest. For adults, it is assumed that each member of the relationship will trade places within the relationship to experience both giving and receiving care, however, without this interchange, the individual, or in this case, the widow, becomes left wanting. As Linda experienced, depression can manage to gain a stronghold on a widow that makes her recovery process even slower and more painful. With proper care and supportive relationships, a widow can have the needed resources to help her heal mentally and emotionally. A friend to talk to, a dinner companion, or just having someone who cares, means a great deal to a widow, especially a widow new in her widowhood journey.

Patriarchal capitalist norms have a tendency to restrict emotional sharing as a societal norm. The concern for efficiency noted in a capitalist system regulates and restricts the emotional, as it is understood as a liability to productivity. With men being strongly socialized to be more stoic in the face of the emotional, women tend to internalize more negative emotions than men do when relationships are not healthy (Belenky et al., 1997). Jennifer experienced how “nobody wants to talk about it [the death]” while Brenda commented, “hopefully become more ‘other’ orientated. Several of

these participants experienced a noticeable change in many relationships. Feeling alone and/or rejected can lead/add to depression. Clinical depression and the feelings of inadequacy appear more frequently in women than in men. However, Belenky et al. (1997), discovered men had more problems with listening than women did. Jennifer searched for someone “who would listen to her story” but quickly discovered “nobody wants to talk about it.” Belenky et al. (1997) explain how frequently women feel as if no one is listening to them. It is difficult when the “conventional feminine goodness means being voiceless as well as selfless” (Gilligan, 1982, p.167).

Possibly, the internalization of emotions induces greater chances for depression, while those who select to not listen can escape it. As dialog and listening are both crucial in relationships, capitalist patriarchal norms can dramatically influence how a widow adjusts to her ability to share emotions and be heard by others (Belenky et al., 1997).

Memberships to social groups such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend, etc. also provide identity frameworks to introduce each group’s norms and expectations (Luttrell, 1997). After Bill died, Linda was “no longer part of the group” with long-time couple-friends. She quickly learned her expected “place” in their company. Widowhood can induce changes in a widow’s identity due to how she defines her ‘place’ in society, and also, how she transitions from wife to widow due to her choice of coping skills (Cheek, 2010). As a form of informal education, experiences like Linda’s can affect a widow’s self-identity in a positive or negative way (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014).

Linda experienced how debilitating and difficult depression was. She had not experienced depression before, at least not in this magnitude, but every day seemed an eternity long. Relationships proved an invaluable way to cope during the day and begin

again the next day. Some friends simply faded away after the first week or so after the death occurred, perhaps thinking that the widow needed to be alone to grieve. However, this oftentimes can leave the widow feeling even lonelier and rejected for not being “complete” without her spouse. Unfortunately, women tend to equate their self-identity with the moral judgements, perceived from society, to define themselves (Gilligan, 1982).

Language is vital in conversations and maintaining relationships while expressing thoughts and emotions between individuals. Without the use of language, relationships suffer and individuals become isolated from individuals and can either search for other relationships or invert into themselves (Belenky et al., 1997). Instead of allowing Jennifer to talk about her grief, friends showed discomfort whenever she mentioned her husband’s name and seemed to feel even more uncomfortable if Jennifer became upset. She learned that if she could avoid talking about the obvious, then she would probably be more accepted by her peers. This was the “invisible college” educating her in how to deal with fear and loss. According to Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer (2006), the fear and confusion a widow experiences from life events can increase her emotions of vulnerability, fear, and depression that in turn, can increase mental and emotional anguish.

The “standoffishness” Jennifer experienced resulted in a search for friends elsewhere and she found them in grief support groups. These new relationships proved important and vital for Jennifer to share in conversation and empathy with the other members who shared in the loss of a loved one. Relationships provide an important way for women to find their voice and share thoughts and ideas with others. Without this

opportunity, many women feel as if they are no longer an important part of the relationship (Belenky, 1997).

Society is reluctant to talk about the topic of death and fatal illnesses most likely out of fear. According to Vicki, who was diagnosed with breast cancer soon after becoming a widow, she admitted, “it’s almost like you have cooties.” Not only did friends disappear from Vicki’s life after becoming a widow but also, she and her two daughters witnessed the murder of her husband by police officers. The way her husband died proved uncomfortable enough to share in conversations let alone compounded with any talk of her life-threatening illness.

Sherry was the only participant who did not experience any negative changes in her relationships and felt her identity was not in question as a widow. However, Sherry mentioned she witnessed other widows who did. Friends rallied around her with meals, companionship, and support after Tony died. Before Tony’s death, Sherry admitted to taking her relationships for granted. She came to believe that “people seemed to feel awkward interacting [with widows] which in turn made [the widow] feel awkward” in the relationship. She described the awkwardness as “everybody wants to be comfortable . . . [and suggested] society needs to be more accepting.” Relationships with family and friends provide widows with ways to define and understand who they are as a person.

A patriarchal capitalist system orders and shapes our relations and relationships. According to Millett (2000), envy plays a key role; meaning the wife is jealous of the freedom and presumed independency of the mistress or professional while they are envious of the security, family, and economic protection of the wife. Could this be the reason why relationships dissolve for widows or that wives fear widows will steal their

husbands? Are widows to assume that even though women are credited with the importance of care and relationships, there are rules and boundaries to friendships and widows are outside those acceptable lines? The participants in this study agreed unanimously with this claim. Linda's response of "I'm really, really careful" seems to sum up what these widows now experienced when in the company of wives and husbands. In order to heal and move forward, the learning experience becomes a "wrenching away of the familiar contexts and relationships within which the old identity has been embedded . . . [her] place in life is no longer a matter of . . . fulfilling the expectations of those [she care's] about" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 81) but to now focus on herself.

Family

Maternal learning, as a mother who assumes responsibility for the care of a child, is a traditional role for women to incorporate into their identity and one that adds information to the study of human development (Roddick, 1980). Learning, for Vicki, consisted of protecting her daughters against the world where people might continue to question and judge why the police shot and killed their father. In addition, Vicki felt she needed to protect her daughters, who were biracial, against any racial discrimination in society. Relationships that Vicki believed would become too volatile and hurtful to her children were dissolved as a means of motherly protection.

Vicki, through no fault of her own, felt she had multiple reasons to protect her children. An additional fear for Vicki, breast cancer, compounded her need to protect her children even further from the possible effects of medical treatment and ultimately, her

future. As she mentioned in her interview, society is afraid and uncomfortable about death and illness. Therefore, when relationships with friends began to change or fade, Vicki dissolved them. She placed her children before herself. To protect them as much as she could against any possible hurt, Vicki relinquished relationships that could threaten the mental and emotional securities for her children. Vicki's experience parallels to what Brenda mentioned earlier about caring for others instead of oneself.

With two adult sons, Beth was the only participant who mentioned a child's relationship turned tense and distant with his mother because of his father's death. No longer contacting Beth or coming home to visit, her oldest son has all but vanished from her life. Beth mentioned she did not want to become a burden to either son after Joe's death so this detachment added to her feelings of discomfort and guilt. Belenky et al. (1997) speak to this behavior noting that responsibility to others, as Beth was feeling, is more commonly experienced through a connection to another human being, while for others, perhaps her son, they might have been seeking more separation and autonomy. Noddings mentions the caring for another person signifies a desire to understand that individual (1984), however, a widow's grief can be compounded when she unsuccessfully offers care that is rejected before she regains her own mental and emotional health.

Chodorow (1978) explains mother and daughter relationships as connected due to the common gender during the child's infancy and throughout her developing years while boys, on the other hand, appear to separate from their mother in order to identify as a male. She continues to have difficulty in communicating with him and hopes the day will

arrive that they will find their way back to each other. Until then, her other son has continued maintain a close relationship with Beth.

Education

A capitalist patriarchy indeed benefits the social institutions who support it; it helps our society run more efficiently. Women traditionally have suffered from what Launius and Hassel (2015) refer to as “gender-equitable policies that would promote female self-sufficiency” (p. 88). Race, age, socioeconomic, religion, and education remain factors recognized as intersectional divisions for women, but widowhood is not included as an oppressed group. The following sections explicate how the widow navigates both informal and formal education.

Informal education

All widows agreed that education, formal and informal, helped them cope and recover from grief and depression. Individuals can learn in a formal classroom setting between teacher and student or through relationships, communication, and life interactions. Individuals learn from everyday living and continue to learn for the remainder of their lives. Learning becomes a process (Belenky et al., 1997). The emotional, social, health, life changes, dependency, support, and autonomy all represent important factors in the transitional abilities of widows (Utz et al., 2011). Diminished opportunities in learning compound a widow’s transition from that of a wife (Utz et al., 2011).

As a part of informal education, Brenda read self-help books; Sherry continued to take professional development courses to keep current with new teaching methods, and the rest of us returned to formal education to learn about the world and to become stronger, more independent individuals. However, we continually kept learning from informal means through relationships, community, and society. Knowledge moved us into a world of independency, courage, and preparation to discover ways to exist alongside patriarchal norms and become our own person. No matter the form of education selected by these widows, we all learned.

Brenda's experience into widowhood allowed her to travel, develop a career, and return to academia. Close to 40 years as a widow, Brenda remembered how customary it was, at that time, to remarry especially for someone as young as she was. She shared, "I mean my life would have always been as part of a relationship and it hasn't been. *It's been me, just me.*" Brenda shared her hesitancy to develop an intimate relationship with someone new in her life; instead, she concentrated on family and continued to enjoy traveling and taking various classes. For Brenda, this is who she now was and for her, she admitted to be quite happy with her life just the way it was.

Belenky et al. (1997) discuss the importance of words spoken internally to one self. An introspection of how one feels remains important in the discovery of one's identity. Whether one defines the inner voice as God, as Sherry and Linda did, or an example of what one learns, the result educates us in decision making, relationships, interpersonal skills, and of course, everyday life. Brenda considered the inner voice as learning from her experiences during the last forty years as a widow.

Formal education

All the participants enjoyed formal education and the idea of going back to school appealed to them. A formal learning environment for women rich in dialogue greatly increased knowledge to allow relationships and opportunities to develop (Belenky et al., 1997). Vicki's identity after 24 years included being a widow and a teacher. Her plans consisted of a return to education to obtain a PhD in education. Education for her was to provide a new direction that she was now ready to assume. Vicki admitted to education "opening my eyes to understand things I was either ignorant of or oblivious to." She believed that the world needed to become more accepting and loving. She considered herself stronger and more independent due to the past twenty-four years as a widow. "I think that death and then later in my case . . . sickness, has the capacity to humble a person and . . . maybe you don't know everything" after all. For Vicki, a new identity took time to discover for herself. She suggested that widows need "to start dreaming now" for themselves.

Jennifer realized that education was her practical road into the future but remained convinced her relationships to her children came first. Jennifer was resentful that she had to relinquish time devoted to her children for the requirements of a job she still had to find. However, even though Jennifer feared what her future held, she did believe furthering her education would help her not only find a good paying job but also be an example to her two children.

For Beth turning to education was part of fulfilling a longtime goal. Education "saved my life . . . it gave me something to focus on." For Beth, education opened doors that she felt would remain closed to her and education was something she had always

enjoyed, as did the other participants in this study. Formal education allowed us to discover intellectual and epistemological learning (Belenky et al., 1997).

Learning needs

Research on spousal loss does not adequately address the capitalist patriarchal norms that a widow must negotiate. Noddings (2001) critiques the ‘add women and stir’ approach as insufficient. Information collected from women becomes an add on, resulting “in part positive, in part ludicrous [learning]” (Noddings, 2001, p. 29). If we consider the journey of widowhood as a “text,” Noddings shows how, due to the pervasive patriarchy that women’s experiences were not considered either valid or important in society. “There was no school, no teacher, no book that taught her these lessons” (p. 57), to credit women’s experiences as a valuable means to gain knowledge. Women became accustomed to learning through their experiences as a form of education. Perhaps a different form of knowledge than formal education, but still considered worthwhile and important to women’s lives.

Self-discovery

Beth’s learning consisted of additional formal education but also what she learned living as a widow for many years. Beth spoke about getting “her sparkle back in life” and “starting to think of myself as ‘me’ rather than ‘us.’” For myself, a special part of her story struck me personally - the idea of what my spouse would think if he saw me now. I believe it is a thought that goes through every widow’s mind in some version but her story put those thoughts into words.

If Joe came home right now after nine years of not knowing me, he wouldn't know me now. I'm a different person and he would be the same. He wouldn't [have] grown . . . would he like me? Or would I even like him? . . . I've had so many more experiences than he and I had together. Those are new thoughts. I've never had thoughts like those before. So, that's the journey of becoming me.

Beth's reflection about who she is now and who her spouse would encounter today is telling of how much one's husband can shape the role of the wife and how embedded in a man's "way of seeing the world," or patriarchy, a woman's identity can be. Although each participant struggled without her husband, and incurred multiple losses because of spousal loss, including her self-identity (Cheek, 2010), each also sensed a new sense of autonomy, especially with going back to school. To learn how to redefine herself and journey through widowhood, each participant learned, formally and informally, to accept herself as a different person than as a wife. In order for this to happen, she had to first understand her present identity and decide the best path for her future as a widow (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996). According to Lopata (1973), the loss of a marital identity instigates the widow's need to redefine her own self-identity.

The widows in this study craved to discover a sense of 'who am I now' taken from the attitudes of society to the knowledge they acquired for themselves. Belenky et al. (1997) remark, "the relationship between a person and an idea seems doomed to be one-sided, since an idea cannot reciprocate the care lavished upon it by a thinker . . . until we hear it speak to us" (p. 102). Noddings (1984) adds, "when we understand, we feel that this object-other has responded to us" (p. 169) allowing us to realize this represents

building a new type of relationship (Belenky, 1997) that allows for new and different types of relationships to continually come into our lives.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to explore the learning journeys of women in the wife-to-widow transition. Such a journey can introduce a large number of unique experiences based upon age, culture, race, education, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. Therefore, this study, through the widows' voices, recognizes not only the grief involved with the spousal loss, but also the ways the loss of the male couple counterpart impacted one's interaction with the widow and the new strategies that the widow was called upon to develop to make sense of a patriarchal society. The widows' experiences, especially with challenges, became opportunities whereby they learned more about themselves and how to navigate society. What are the experiences of widows who have pursued further education after their spouse's death? What, if any, difference did further education make in their lives?

Conclusions

I discovered a void in literature that focused on the experiences of widows' and their learning into widowhood. What little information I did find included coping behaviors such as gardening, walking, hobbies, vacationing, new careers, etc. (Janke, Nimrod, and Kleiber, 2008a), directed more to temporarily getting one's mind off grief than considering identity issues in the process. Janke,

Nimrod, and Kleiber (2008c) state, “relatively little evidence is available about how leisure involvement changes with spousal loss, and even less about how leisure activity is associated with the well-being of widows during this transition” (p. 250), emphasizing the need for additional research on widows. As a result, I used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of seven widows including my narrative.

The widows in this study shared their personal experiences along with how informal and formal learning developed them into the women they are today. Several themes emerged from this study: social norms, the dominance of a capitalist patriarchal system, relationships, and informal and formal education. I used a feminist lens to understand the changes to relationships (family, friends, and community) and how education (formal and informal) shaped their lives. The dominant theoretical lenses were what Belenky et al (1997), call “women’s ways of knowing” and what Nell Noddings (1994) calls “the ethics of care and education.”

I end this chapter with recommendations and implications that will hopefully become the responsibility of society and suggest ideas about future research. Based on the participants’ narratives found in chapters four, five, and six, along with the data analysis reported in this chapter, I offer the following conclusions for this study.

Relationships

The majority of women in this study experienced strained relationships among family, friends, and community as widows. These friendships were in direct contrast to how they had been earlier as a wife. The one participant that did not personally experience any relationship changes remarked that she had witnessed multiple women who did experience such difficulty so she understood the phenomena existed. The majority of participants credited this change in relationships as societal issue, one that involved social norms that made it uncomfortable for people to talk about death or to interact with those who had recently experienced it. In part, this comes from a capitalist patriarchal society that values efficiency and rationality over the emotional and personal.

Several participants expressed fear as a possible motivator used to avoid the subject. At a time when a widow needs someone to talk to, receive support, and companionship, the distancing by once caring relationships compounds the emotional grief she already experiences from spousal loss. Caring represents a “quest for understanding” (Noddings, 1984, p. 169). Depending on how a widow interprets this apparent lack of concern, this treatment can have damaging effects on her mental and emotional health.

Defining widows

Participants unanimously agreed that social norms and stereotypes influenced a widow’s perception of herself. People seemed to have expectations for what was deemed an acceptable time for mourning, the removal of wedding

rings, or even when to date. One participant described social expectations for widows as boundaries that included when it was time “to return to normal” but not too soon, not too long, but within the norm determined by society that speaks, according to Belenky et al., (1997), why women “often doubt their intellectual competence” (p. 4). The way widows view their world influences her confidence and ability to survive alone.

Living in a patriarchal society, many norms have traditionally been passed from generation to generation. One participant argued that society stereotypes widows as little old grey haired women with nothing left in their futures. While a patriarchal system reinforces, if not teaches, gender norms for wives, widows do not escape the socialized norms for their newly acquired status. One participant admitted how being a wife meant somebody wanted her or she belonged to someone, as a widow meant that nobody wanted her. Even for those who became aware of the patriarchal norms, there was no easy escape. Nevertheless, they all persevered.

Formal and informal learning

All the participants credited Belenky et al. (1997) the ‘invisible college’, (p. xi) formal and informal education, to help them adjust to the death of a husband along with discovering their identity as a widow. Whether education was a method to distract themselves from the grief or the fulfillment of a longtime goal, these widows claimed learning enabled them to redefine themselves as someone other than a wife.

All of the participants pursued additional formal education that in turn, helped them move forward with new opportunities. The majority also became involved with new interests such as traveling and volunteering. No matter the individual choice of each of the widows, formal and informal education provided opportunities to discover her identity as a woman and as a widow.

The self-concepts and identities of women are a result of learning through family and community that includes formal and informal means. “Women’s ways of knowing” influenced how widows adapted and navigated their transition from wife to widow in a patriarchal world. The widows in the study shared their experiences of fears, insecurities, and loneliness, along with a search to become her own person. A study cannot fully comprehend the experiences and the manner that the widow learns them due to the uniqueness of every individual’s life (Belenky et al., 1997). However, the seven participants provided a glimpse of the experiences of widows and enough to consider how to ensure a more supportive environment for those in this situation and with those experiencing loss in general.

All of the participants pursued further education, as this was part of the criteria for their selection. This focus was pivotal in their journey to understand ‘who am I?’ Both their formal education journey, as well as learning through social interactions or informal learning, contributed to their growth and recovery.

Implications

Social responsibilities

The combination of a patriarchal and capitalist society engenders isolating effects towards those who are grieving and the results can be very harmful to widows. In the abrupt transition from wife to widow, the participants felt fear, confusion, and isolation. Until additional research brings awareness to widows and their experiences, society will continue to limit the emotional expression of those in need to be heard. Excluding and isolating behaviors can only worsen the pain that one already feels and lead to unhealthy behavior on the part of the widow, including depression.

The fact remains that the death of a spouse or partner will be a situation many individuals will likely experience at some point in their lives. As common and inevitable as this occurrence is, everyday conversations about death remains a taboo topic outside of counseling services. One widow described talking about death was similar to “a veil of silence” that prohibited conversations. However, as time went on, in the absence of the former patriarchal influences of one’s husband, each of the widows started to exercise agency in realizing their choices and freedoms. Through social interactions and reading, each participant grew in knowledge and confidence. For a widow, being able to share memories and feeling with friends or family, helps her to accept the past and move on. Though different in context, one [experience] is as valid as the next (Belenky et al., 1997). As Belenky et al. (1997) write:

Women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life’s work. Through listening and responding, they draw out the voices and minds of those they help to raise up. In the process, they

often come to hear, value, and strengthen their own voices and minds as well (p. 48).

Relationships are key to supporting widows through the transition without their husbands. Women learn and develop confidence from caring and having relationships with others. The experiences of care, communication, and interpersonal skills shape human development. Both the good and bad experiences become part of this process. Experiences provide outcomes that teach individuals and continue to build upon layers of knowledge with each new learning situation.

Widowhood exemplifies extreme forms of patriarchy; single and divorced women also face patriarchy, but the widow endures a type of double oppression as the result of the death of a husband coupled with the patriarchy that is typically experienced by women in general. The findings in this study revealed that widows commonly experienced isolation, rejection, and misunderstanding from peers and community members, and frequently, these difficult experiences, together or separately, may lead to depression. These findings imply a need to cultivate mechanisms in society to create broader systems of support for widows.

Recommendations

Advice: Widow to widow

Each participant provided advice for new widows. The following ‘widow to widow’ suggestions include, “find a goal, a new interest, go do it even if you don’t want to, you’re not crazy, expect nothing from yourself, what’s stopping you, share passwords, and don’t be afraid to do anything.” Only one widow suggested not giving advice to

anyone since “people gave me all kinds of advice. It was horrible for the most part.” She added that companionship or help would be a better idea.

The following recommendations reflect the experiences and thoughts of the participants. These suggestions may help other widows understand themselves better in relation to widowhood.

1. Recognizing that the capitalist economy tends to dismiss if not discipline the expression of emotions, for the survival of humanity and specifically widows, it is necessary to produce new sources of faith and enchantment with the dynamics of the capitalist economy.
2. Widows can experience intense emotions such as fear and confusion that they interpret as suggestive to their intellectual capabilities. Mental health providers and support groups need to be educated to share with widows that these emotions are normal in the grief process but in addition, to counsel them to understand and overcome such negativity.
3. Education from friends and institutions is needed to support widows in pursuing their dreams, old and new. One is never too old, too late, or too *anything* to be happy.
4. Education is needed for society and widows to understand that each person has their own timing for grieving and for society and social institutions to allow widows the respect that is needed to take the personal time they need to heal. Feeling crazy is a normal reaction to grief and part of the recovery process from a tragic experience.

5. Lastly, widows need to understand through counseling, education, and support groups to not feel guilty - not to feel guilty for being alive, not to feel guilty to pursue old and new dreams, and not to feel guilty to be happy again.
6. More education needs to be available to children and young people in the schools around death.

Future Research

Research has ignored and overlooked the importance of studies that focus on women's experiences only. This might well explain why women struggle against patriarchal norms in society. Since little data exists to inform society specifically on widows' development, additional research is necessary to address their learning. Women's 'ways of knowing,' knowledge culled from intuition and social interactions, is not highly valued. Informal and formal means of education assisted widows to understand widowhood and the effects of patriarchy in their lives.

While this study focused on a group of widows who were Caucasian, heterosexual and of similar ages, future research is obviously needed to explain the experiences of women who vary in their identities according to race, class, sexuality, and disability define themselves and their place within society.

Future research suggestions are required to learn more about the widowed population for mental, emotional, and physical health providers, education administrators, and other organizations in society. I offer the following suggestions for future research:

1. Widowers (men) and their experiences with the loss of a wife; how do widows and widowers differ in the experiences of the loss of a spouse?

2. Intersectional characteristics: How do race, age, culture, socioeconomic, religion, sexuality, disability, and level of education factor into the experiences of spousal loss?

These suggestions would provide society with the additional knowledge, understanding, and support for individuals who experience spousal loss. The knowledge alone could equip societal members with ways to maintain relationships and provide care to individuals who journey through widowhood.

Final Researcher's Reflection

Deciding on studying the experiences of widows was initially a difficult topic for me. While I no longer 'considered' myself a new widow, the reading and gathering of data brought back many painful memories of that day when my own husband died. Thinking about my experiences plus learning about the experiences of these fabulous women that I had the pleasure to interview was both rewarding and disheartening.

It was 'rewarding' . . . as another way of healing. I believe the knowledge that I have gained about women, widows, and yes, even death has helped me in my own recovery. I do not think one ever 'gets over' such a traumatic event but the hurt and sorrow does fade over time. This is probably what is meant by "God doesn't give you more than what you can handle" but I think most widows would say, "I wasn't so sure about that" but we did survive and we are continuing to adjust, grow, and become more in-tune with ourselves.

It was 'disheartening' . . . in the sense of the sadness and grief widows experience. While our stories remain unique, we all seemingly share in a comradeship of

understanding and empathy with each other that is unexplainable. Disheartening in the sense that society and other individuals appear to ignore how to have conversations with us or how to act when in our company, only adding to our isolation and grief. We do not need additional stress and worries right now, we have enough to worry and stress over. In addition, it was disheartening to hear of the loss and sadness these women experienced in life.

Education has given all of us, I think, something to do, look forward to, and as Linda remarked, “it gave me structure” . . . structure at a time in our lives when everything was chaotic and surreal. As I mentioned, education does not have to be in a classroom setting but in conversations and relationships. For myself, I learned a lot from talking and listening, doing these interviews, and gaining a sense of other widows’ experiences.

Interviewing Jennifer reminded me of those emotions of being a new widow. Less than a year into her journey, Jennifer remained in that ‘raw emotional’ state I remember so well. Easy to cry, easy to grieve, and easy to be afraid were similarities Jennifer and I shared. As the researcher in our conversation, I had to remain self-directed with the questions I needed to ask but yet, respect Jennifer’s sensitivity at the same time. If I had been a new widow like Jennifer, I am sure both of us would have shared in a good cry during our talk but we were at different places on our wife to widow journey.

I so admired Sherry and Linda for their strong spiritual beliefs. They appeared to benefit so much from the peace they found in this relationship. Though Sherry was a widow less than two years, she demonstrated composure and calmness in our

conversation. She later admitted to asking God to place His words in her mouth to say and this was very noticeable in our interview.

Linda's depiction of sharing her experiences of depression resonated with me deeply as I quite understood what she meant. I always described it as a deep, dark hole that I just could not escape from. I will admit getting professional help was the best thing I could have done for myself at this time. A widow needs to remember she has to take care of herself mentally, emotionally, and physically now. That is important.

Beth's words brought the most meaning to me of all the participants. I had thought along similar lines but had not really put into words the possibility of how much I had changed in the last eight years. When I look back and compare 'who I am now' with 'who I was back then', I doubt that Ron would even recognize that I was the same person he married so long ago. As Beth mentioned, she had changed so much as a widow but if Joe could come back, he would not have grown as she had. New experiences now were hers alone. I can remember getting goosebumps when Beth shared this with me as her words, at least for me, were so true.

Vicki's story of grief and sadness was compounded with breast cancer, raising two small children alone, and witnessing her husband's death. Those experiences helped me to realize that others experienced so much more distress and negativity than I did and I should count my blessings. Vicki's story was full of strength as a survivor in all of these situations and someone I admire in the obstacles she had overcome.

Meeting Brenda was a glimpse into how a widow of forty years defined her life. That is a long, long time to adjust to being on one's own but she certainly has accomplished this. This makes me think about the changes in my own life that have

already occurred and I wonder what changes are ahead for me. Whatever they are, I now know that I can deal with them, learn from them, and grow from them. I have to in order to survive.

My hope in writing about this topic is to share a small number of widow experiences to bring awareness and heighten the need for more research on widows to happen. I believe it is vital to know as much as one can about any group before any social change can possibly happen. Also, if just one other widow reads this dissertation and the information helps her in some small, minute way, I will feel as if my work is truly worthwhile.

I have learned how important communication is, even with topics that individuals tend to avoid, such as death. If we do not share in the knowledge, understanding, and empathy for others, society will continue to exert power and control, discriminate with those who are different, and dismiss the value of issues not understood. The good news is all of us can change just by the caring attitude that Noddings mentions. This positive change can occur if we unite and remain determined, that change ‘will’ take place. It is my hope that as members of society and readers of this study, you too, will see the value of every unique individual and this includes yourself. You are important.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Participant Consent Form, IRB Approved

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study to understand the experiences of widows who seek further education.

Education represents different things to many people. Traditionally thought of as school situations, education could also consist of multiple ways to learn. This could include support groups, church groups, school/universities, self-help books, counseling, family/friends, or through other community resources.

Please read this invitation thoroughly and ask any questions or concerns you may have in the participation requirements.

Purpose of Study

The study's focus investigates society's perceptions of widows. Do the meanings and possible stereotypes of widowhood affect the way she defines herself or not? And, if so, how?

The collected data from this study will be used for dissertation material required of OSU's College of Education for a PhD in Social Foundations.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you are selected for this study, you will be asked to participate in the following exercises. As the researcher, I will coordinate a convenient time for you to be interviewed. This interview (1-3 hours possible) will be located in a public location, tape-recorded, and includes notes manually taken by the researcher.

An informational page (face page) will consist of general demographic information that is confidential. Name, age, religion preference, and education represent the type of questions.

In addition, you will be asked to provide feedback to a short writing prompt provided to you. Many individuals find they are more comfortable communicating a 1-2 page writing in the comfort of their own home.

Lastly, you may be asked to read your transcribed interview in case of a recorded disparity or confusion on the part of the researcher during the transcription process.

Risks/Discomforts of Study Participation

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, you may feel discomfort in remembering or sharing personal stories about your experiences as a widow.

There are no physical risks in your participation in this study.

Confidentiality

This research is completely confidential and anonymous. No information will be collected that will be used in the study to indicate your identity and you may elect any pseudonym to represent yourself.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked cabinet, all electronic data will be coded, and password protected. Only the researcher will have access to any tape recordings or manually notes taken during the research. These will be destroyed once the dissertation has been completed. No information from any data source will possess the ability to define your identity.

Payments

You will receive a (one time) payment of \$20 in gift certificate format from QuikTrip for participation in the interview, face page, return of the completed writing prompt.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation in this study remains entirely your decision. You possess the freedom to remove yourself at any time from participating without any remorse or hard feelings from anyone associated with this study. You also have the right of refusal to reply to a particular question asked of you either during the interview process or group discussion.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You will always have the right to ask questions about this research. I will answer your questions at the start of the process or at any time during the study.

Should you desire to speak with me about other potential concerns that I failed to include about the study, please contact me at nancy.volavka@okstate.edu.

Consent

Your signature below defines your acceptance as a participant for this study. You have read and understood this form. You will be provided a copy of the finalized form to keep for your records.

Your name (please print): _____

Signature:

X

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date:

Appendix B - Demographic Face Page, IRB Approved

Demographic Survey – All information will be kept completely confidential, anonymous, and destroyed after the completion of the research.

Name _____

Do you wish to use a pseudonym for the purposes of this study and if so, please state:

Age (please circle)

Ethnicity

40-49

50-59

60+

Current marital status (please circle how you **best** define yourself)

Single

Widow

Wife

Divorced

Remarried

Other (please explain) _____

Time since spousal death _____

Education

High School

GED

Some College

Associates Degree

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree

Doctorate Degree

Other (please explain) _____

Any additional information you would like to share at this point in the study (you may write on the back of this page).

Thank you for completing this demographic survey.

Appendix C - Writing Prompt, IRB Approved

This is an opportunity for creativity on your part. You may use your favorite poem, story, song, drawing, or anything else that you are led to create or share. Share something that speaks to your experiences since the death of your husband. You may use additional pages if you wish.

Appendix D - Interview Protocol, IRB Approved

1. Would you mind telling me about your journey since your husband died?
2. Have you gone back to school to learn a new skill since then?
 - a. Career change?
 - b. Reflect new goals
3. Explain education as an opportunity for growth. What are some experiences you have had where you have grown or learned a lot?
4. Tell me what difference, if any, these education experiences have made.
5. How would you characterize your self-growth?
6. What role has your community played in your personal growth?
 - a. Family, friends, support, church
7. What changes have you personally experienced in the process of losing a husband?
8. How have you coped with these changes?
9. How would you describe your identity since your husband's death?
10. Who are you today?

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, May 13, 2016
IRB Application No ED1691
Proposal Title: Who am I now? Widows who search for self-identity

Reviewed and Exempt
Processed as:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 5/12/2019

Principal
Investigator(s):

Nancy Volavka	Denise Blum
1904 E. Queens St.	206 Willard
Broken Arrow, OK 74012	Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

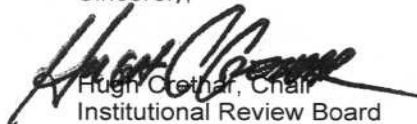
- ☒ The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,


Hugh Oethar, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Nancy Sue Volavka

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: "WHO AM I NOW?": WIDOWS' LEARNING JOURNEYS
IN SELF-IDENTITY

Major Field: Education

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2017.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma in 2007.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Business Administration at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 2005.

Experience:

Adjunct Faculty: Tulsa Community College
The University of Oklahoma

Student Affairs Career and Volunteer Services:
The University of Oklahoma

Professional Memberships: Counsel for Certification in Volunteer Administration, Volunteer Tulsa, Tulsa Alive